THE TOUR OF THE ZERO CLUB

BY CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL

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BONEHILL

DAVID McKAY

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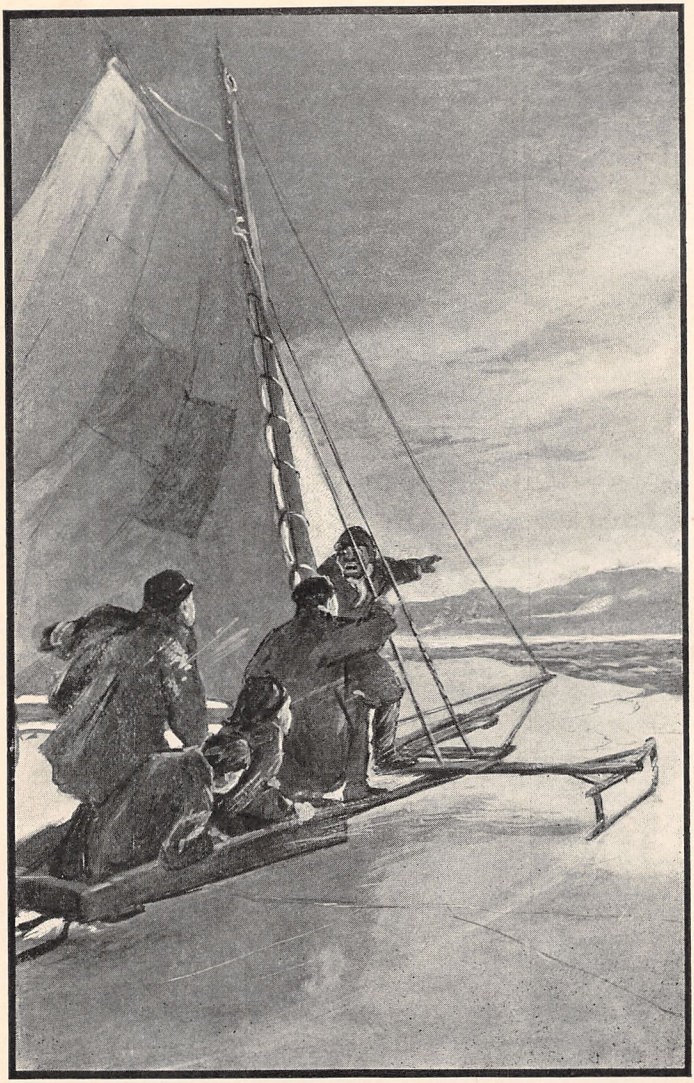

" Stop her somebody ! We will all be drowned ! "

(See page 74)

Tour of the Zero Club

OR

Adventures Amid Ice and Snow

BY

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL

AUTHOR OF

"Neka, the Boy Conjuror," "Tour of the Zero Club."

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Tour of the Zero Club

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TOUR OF THE ZERO CLUB.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TOBOGGAN-SLIDE.

"All ready?"

"All ready!"

"Then here we go! Hold on, everybody, unless you want to be sent flying when we reach the curve!"

As Harry Webb uttered the last words he gave his long toboggan, the *Buster*, a final shove, and hopped on behind his three companions, and away they started on the trip down Doublehead Hill.

It was a stirring scene. The upper and lower hills, although light in the full moon, were made doubly bright by the scores of bonfires and pine torches which blazed on either side of the narrow toboggan-slide.

Scores of boys and girls were out, and not a few ladies and gentlemen also, and all looked warm and happy in their gayly-colored toboggan suits.

The long, low sleds were out by the dozens, and Jack Bascoe, who was steering the *Buster* as best he could, had a difficult time of it, keeping clear of dangerous collisions.

"By jingo! but this is fine!" cried Andy Bascoe, Jack's

younger brother. "Who would want better sport than this?"

"You're right, it's fine!" returned Boxy Woodruff, the most light-hearted boy in Rudskill. "A fellow would like to keep sailing like this forever, eh? Just spread out your arms and—wow!"

Boxy's imitation of flying came to a sudden stop as the toboggan shot over a little hill and came down with a thump on the other side. He was thrown a bit to one side, and only saved himself by grasping Jack Bascoe around the middle with both arms.

"Hold on, Boxy!" cried Jack, a little alarmed.

"That's what I'm doing," returned Boxy.

"I feel you," said Jack, grimly. "But don't pull me off, please. I've got to keep my eyes open for the other toboggans and sleds, you know."

"I'm all right now, and I'll do my flying act some other time," returned Boxy.

"Here comes the *Whistler!*" cried Harry. "We ought to be able to beat Pete Sully's toboggan."

"Of course!" added Andy.

"Everybody push!" put in Boxy, in a dry way that made them all laugh. "Maybe you would like me to get off and help pull," he added, in mock seriousness.

As they were going at a speed little less than a mile a minute down the long hill, the others laughed louder than ever.

The *Whistler,* with Pete Sully, the bully of the town, and several of his chums, was creeping up by their side.

It was a brand-new toboggan, and slid along as though greased.

"You fellows ain't in it any more!" shouted Sully to Harry, as he came within speaking distance. "Here's where we leave you away behind!"

"You've got more weight!" returned Harry. "Give me the same weight, and the *Buster* will walk away from you with ease."

"I'll bet you a dollar you can't!" shouted Sully.

"I haven't got a dollar to bet, Pete," replied Harry, and he told the truth, for, although he owned the *Buster,* Harry Webb was poor, and had not known what it was to own a dollar for several years, ever since his father had lost his money in an unfortunate real estate speculation.

"Oh, you're afraid to bet," cried Sully, mockingly. "Good-by, slow boots!"

"I'll bet my pocket-knife against yours we can beat you!" said Harry, considerably nettled by Sully's taunts. "We will take the same number aboard and try our skill."

"Done!" yelled Sully, for he was now several rods ahead.

Down the last of the second hill and along the level road shot the *Buster,* and presently came to a standstill just where the Rudskill turnpike branched off across the railroad tracks. The *Whistler* had gone on a couple of hundred feet farther up the side of the tracks.

"Told you we'd beat you!" exclaimed Pete Sully, as he and his chums joined Harry and his friends. "You

had better not bet your pocket-knife unless you want to lose it."

"I am not afraid to try against you, Sully, and perhaps it will be you who will lose his pocket-knife."

"Humph!" sneered Sully. "No fear. And if I did, I guess I could buy another easy enough, even if somebody else couldn't."

This was a direct shot at Harry's poverty, and made the ears of the poor boy tingle, while his handsome face flushed.

"Come on and try your skill and quit your talking," exclaimed Jack Bascoe, rather sharply, and he faced Sully as he spoke. "There is no use in wasting time here."

Had it been any one else than Jack Bascoe who had spoken thus suggestively to him, Pete Sully might have picked a quarrel then and there. He was a very overbearing boy, and never allowed a chance of whipping some other boy go by him.

But the truth of the matter was, that he had once run up against Jack's fist in a most surprising fashion. Blood had flowed freely, and from that time on the bully of Rudskill knew there were two boys in the town he dare not molest, Jack and his younger brother, Andy.

So, muttering something under his breath which Harry and his friends could not hear, Sully and his cohorts began to drag their toboggan up the long hillside. They were followed by the other boys, with the *Buster*. The walk was a tedious one, especially so to the two sides that wished to race each other.

"Whom shall we get to add weight?" asked Harry, as

they at last gained the starting-place. "I don't see any of our crowd here; do you?"

"I don't," returned Jack.

"What's the matter with Pickles Johnsing?" put in Boxy. "He's got enough weight for two."

Pickles Johnsing was a stout, round-faced colored boy, with big red lips, and teeth which reminded one very forcibly of double-blank dominoes set in twin rows. He was a very willing and decent sort of a young darky, and had many friends in the little river town in which my story for the present is located.

"He'll do first-rate," said Harry. "Hello, Pickles!" he shouted.

"Hullo, dar, Harry!" returned the colored boy. "Got yo' tobog out ag'in, I see."

"Yes, Pickles, and we want you to ride down with us this trip. Put your bread-shovel out of the way."

"T'anks, Harry, I'se like to ride down on de *Buster* fust-rate," grinned Pickles. "Wot yo' gwine ter do, race Pete Sully?"

"Yes, Pickles, and we must beat him," replied Andy. "You know just how to help us along."

"Humph! if he ain't going to take that coon on the trip!" sneered Pete Sully.

"You ain't racing niggers, are you, Pete?" questioned one of his followers.

"I don't know as I am," returned Pete Sully, slowly.

He walked over to where Harry sat on his toboggan.

"I expected to race white fellows," he remarked, sourly.

"Pickles is all right," said Jack Bascoe. "He's the dark horse to win. If you are going to race, get ready, for Harry isn't going to wait all night for you."

"Where's that knife!" demanded Sully, thus changing the subject.

"Here it is," replied Harry, producing it. "Four blades, and every one in good condition. Where is yours?"

"It's just as good as that," retorted Sully, bringing forth his pocket-knife. "Four blades and a corkscrew."

"Who's going to hold them as stakes?" questioned Bill Dixon, Sully's most intimate chum.

The matter was talked over for several minutes, and finally a gentleman who had come to the hill to look at the sport agreed to become stakeholder.

Before the matter was decided, however, Sully did a good deal of whispering to Bill Dixon, who immediately left the crowd, which had moved over to the largest of the nearby camp-fires.

At last all was in readiness for the start. Hearing of the race, many on the course left their toboggans and sleds to witness the contest.

"Now, remember, the first to reach the railroad track switch wins the race," shouted the stakeholder. "Are you ready?"

"We are," said Sully.

"Then—go!"

With a great push, Sully sent the *Whistler* on the downward course in fine style. Harry likewise gave the *Buster* a good shove, and his toboggan also started. But

he was a rod behind the other sled in the fraction of a second.

"Something is dragging under us!" cried Andy, quickly. "I can feel it plainly."

"What can it be?" exclaimed Harry, in alarm. "Anybody's clothing caught?"

"My clo' all hunky," replied Pickles. "Dat feels like it was a rope under dar. Did yo' tie a rope to de tobog, Harry?"

"I took the rope off and left it with Mr. Bruley when we started," returned the owner of the *Buster*. "It's no use," he groaned. "They'll reach the tracks before we are half-way down!"

In the meanwhile Boxy Woodruff was feeling along the side of the toboggan. It was not long before his hand came in contact with an end of wash-line.

"Here it is, tied around the toboggan!" he cried. "I'll bet this is some of Pete Sully's underhanded work!"

"Yank it loose, can't you?" exclaimed Harry, anxiously. "Cut it or break it—something."

Boxy pulled with all of his strength, and the wash-line, which, luckily, was old and rotten, parted. An instant later it was clear of the toboggan bottom, and streaming along behind like the thin tail of a kite.

Freed from this hindrance, the *Buster* shot forward on its course. Like a comet it passed over the brow of the second hill, with the *Whistler* over a hundred feet ahead. Could they regain the ground they had lost?

CHAPTER II.

LOST OR WON?

It was one thing for the boys on the *Buster* to wish to range alongside of the *Whistler* again, but it was quite a different thing to do it.

Both toboggans were rushing along with furious speed, and now the end of the course was close at hand.

"Sit jess a little moah to de front," was Pickles' suggestion, and it was immediately acted upon.

"Didn't I tell you you wasn't in it?" shouted Pete Sully, derisively.

"There isn't a toboggan around Rudskill can beat the *Whistler!*" put in Bill Dixon.

On and on went the two toboggans. The last little rise was passed and the speed began to slacken.

Suddenly the *Whistler* struck a snag—the dead limb of a tree, which was half-hidden in the snow.

It quickly swerved out of its course, directly in the path of the oncoming *Buster*.

"Get out of the way!" shouted Jack Bascoe, who was, as usual, in the front. "Turn her around, Sully!"

"Don't run into us!" shrieked several on board of the *Whistler*. "To the right! To the right!"

Those on the *Buster* tried to do as advised, not only for the sake of their rivals, but also to save themselves. But

it was too late to do much. The *Buster* swung around a trifle, and then came up sideways with a bang, and out into the snow flew every one of the boys on both toboggans.

Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, although several faces and hands were scratched, and Pickles got a bruise in the shin, his one weak spot. All were soon on their feet, and the toboggans were dragged to one side, out of the way of any that might be following.

"What did you mean by running into us?" demanded Pete Sully, hotly, as he stalked up to Harry.

"What could we do when you blocked up the course?" retorted the owner of the *Buster.*

"We didn't block up the course!"

"You certainly did," interposed Jack. "You ought to be thankful that we didn't run right over you."

"It wasn't fair!"

"It was fair," said Harry. "But I'll tell you what was not fair—tying that wash-line under my toboggan, and that's just what one of your crowd did."

"What's that?" growled Bill Dixon. "We didn't touch your confounded bread-shovel."

"Some one tied that rope on," said Andy, picking up the line in question. "It smells like your rope, Longman," he went on, to a boy whose father was the captain of a schooner on the river. "It's a regular tarred line."

"See here, because you lost the race, you needn't claim a foul!" growled Sully, wrathfully. "You may think——"

"Lose the race!" came in a chorus from those who had rode upon the *Buster.*

"We lost no race!" added Jack, vigorously.

"Yes, you did."

"I certainly don't see it."

"You ran into us, and that gives us the race," said Bill Dixon.

"Not by a jugful," exclaimed Harry. "We were on the left, where we belonged. Had you kept to the right——"

"You'd have been all right," finished Boxy. "Come on up the hill and try it over again."

"I won't do it," returned Sully, sourly. "It's my race."

"He won't race because we've found out about that rope," said Harry, growing angry. "I'm going to tell the crowd about it as soon as we get to the top of the hill."

"Do you mean to say that I placed that rope under your toboggan?" blustered Sully, stepping up to him with clinched fists.

"One of your crowd did," returned Harry. "It was put there for the sole purpose of keeping us back."

"If you say I put it there, I'll hammer you!"

"You heard what I said. I am not prepared to say more—just now. You may hear from me later."

Thus talking, the two crowds made their way to the top of the hill. Here they found an excited group of boys waiting for them.

"Did the *Whistler* win?" cried several.

"Certainly we won!" replied Sully.

"It was no race," explained Jack. "They struck a snag, and we ran into them while they were on our side of the course."

"Somebody said that Dixon boy tied a rope under your toboggan," remarked the gentleman who held the two pocket-knives, to Harry. "Did you find anything wrong?"

"We did!" cried the boy. "Here is the rope. Who saw Dixon do it?"

The question was passed around, and it finally leaked out that three boys in the crowd had seen the sneaking action performed. Dixon had taken the rope from Longman's sled, and this Longman was finally forced to admit.

"No race," said the stakeholder, promptly. "I will give both boys their pocket-knives. Dixon, you ought to be ruled off the slide," he added to the bully's toady.

"I don't care, I claim that race," said Sully, loudly. "I don't care a rap about the pocket-knife. It's not half as good as my own."

Harry wanted to try again, but the bully declined, saying it was getting late, and he was expected home. In reality, Sully was afraid to race fairly.

"We'll try our good points at the skating races day after to-morrow," he said to Harry. "You musn't forget that I am in the five mile race against you and Jack Bascoe, and Milne and the rest."

"I have a good memory," returned Harry, pointedly. "And you can rest assured that we'll look out for any more rope tricks," and with this parting shot he walked

off with his toboggan, accompanied by Jack and the others.

"Dat dere Sully makes me mos' drefful sick," said Pickles. "He t'inks de hull town must bow to him. It would be de best t'ing in de world if da would jess git togedder and run him off de co's."

"One of us must beat him in that race," said Jack, decidedly. "If he wins, he won't stop crowing for a month."

"You can do it, Jack," said Andy, who had great confidence in his older brother's abilities. "He hasn't near the wind you have."

"That may be, but he's got everlastingly long legs, Andy; don't forget that."

"I'll bank on Harry," put in Boxy, who was Harry's most intimate friend, having lived next door to him for years. "His legs are pretty long, and his wind is right there every time."

"Well, I don't care if I do lose, if Harry wins," said Jack. "So long as we keep the first prize away from the Sully crowd."

"I'm going to do my best to win that race," put in Harry. "Not only for the honor, but because I want the money."

"Has Mr. Grimes decided to put up a purse?" asked Jack, quickly.

"He told me he would put up a gold medal, but if any one wanted it, he would buy the medal back for fifteen dollars. And if I had fifteen dollars I wouldn't have to ask father for a cent of spending money for a year."

"And you could go on that tour with us, couldn't you?" put in Boxy, quickly. "That is, if we go."

"I suppose I could," returned Harry, thoughtfully.

The idea of a winter tour had been in the minds of this crowd of boys for several weeks. Rudskill was situated upon the banks of a well-known river in New York State, and their idea was to build an iceboat, and cruise up the river a distance of some forty miles, and then start on a trip among the mountains to a sheet of water, which I shall call Rock Island Lake. Once on the lake, they would cross it on skates, and then locate a winter camp in the heart of the mountains on the western side, where they could spend several weeks in hunting and fishing and other winter sports.

The four boys had already formed themselves into an organization which they called the Zero Club—certainly a most appropriate name for winter use. Jack Bascoe was the president, and also general director of the club, which held weekly meetings regularly in the harness-room of Mr. Bascoe's barn.

It was Andy who had first proposed this trip, and he had found that idea taken up with avidity. A fire in the town schoolhouse had closed that institution six weeks for repairs, and so the time could be taken without losing any part of the school session.

On the following day the four boys gathered together on the river, which, during the past ten days of severe cold, had frozen completely over, to practice for the coming races, which were to be three in number.

The races were gotten up by a Mr. Grimes, a wealthy

and eccentric resident of the town, who personally offered the prizes, which were six in number, a first and second for each race.

As the boys skated around they talked over the matter of leaving home for a time, and also of the expense of such a trip.

"I have reckoned it all out," said Andy. "We can squeeze through on fifty dollars."

"That is, if we get blankets and such stuff from home," said Boxy.

"Certainly. Fifty dollars will only cover the cost of necessary provisions, ammunition and the like. We must furnish our own blankets, clothing, guns, snowshoes, and such things."

"Well, that is twelve dollars and a half each," said Harry.

"I can raise that," meditated Boxy. "I've saved eight dollars, and I'll get father to allow me something on account of my birthday in February next."

The others laughed at this.

"Drawing on a birthday nearly three months off!" remarked Jack. "Your father will want a discount at that rate."

"I've got the money, and more," put in Andy. "And I know Jack has it, too."

"I haven't but fifty cents," said Harry, with a light laugh to cover up his real feelings. "So, you see, it's race or nothing with me."

"I've a good mind to withdraw," suggested Jack.

"Not for the world, Jack. You must stick, and win it—if you can."

"But I would rather have you win it," persisted the president and general manager of the Zero Club.

"No, I won't have it that way. Promise me you'll try for the medal, and will do your best to win it."

Jack demurred, but Harry would not listen, so finally he agreed to do as his friend wished.

The ice on the river was as smooth as glass, and the promises for some great races were very encouraging.

CHAPTER III.

THE RACES.

The following day dawned clear and bright. The races were to come off at ten, half-past ten and eleven o'clock, and long before this time the river in front of the town was alive with skaters.

Harry had some work to do at home, and did not appear until a little before ten. He found his friends anxiously awaiting him.

"Thought you had given it up," said Boxy. "I know you are fairly aching to let Pete Sully win that five-miler."

"He won't win it unless Jack and I drop out," returned Harry.

"That's so," put in Jack Bascoe. "We'll do our best to leave 'em all behind, eh, Harry?"

The Zero Club gathered at one side of the river, while Pete Sully and his crowd gathered at the other. Milne, also a good skater, glided here and there by himself. He was a good deal of a dude, and on this account had but few friends among the young people of Rudskill.

Sully was bragging about what he was going to do, and talked so loudly that he disgusted many who would otherwise have taken an interest in his endeavors. He was willing to bet all in his pockets—which was not

much—that he would easily outdistance those who were pitted against him.

The first race, one of half-a-mile dash, was presently called, and six boys ranged up in line at the starting point. Boxy was in the crowd, he preferring this sort of contest to one where staying powers were required.

The boys started off like a flash at the signal, a loud shouting from the crowd following them.

The short race was over almost before the spectators had ceased to yell. A fellow named Tory had won, with Boxy a close second.

"Good for you, Boxy!" cried Jack. "If I do as well I shall be satisfied."

"It's a silver medal for my chest," replied Boxy, proudly. "And that's better than a leather one."

After a short intermission, the second race, two miles, straightaway, was called. Andy was in this, and also Bill Dixon and four others.

"Look out for Dixon," whispered Jack to his brother. "He may try to trick you as he did the crowd on the toboggan."

"I'll be on my guard," responded Andy.

When the start was made, Andy did not catch his stroke as quicky as did the others, and as a consequence they gained several yards on him.

"Go in, Andy!" cried Harry. "You can do it if you try!"

"He can't get near Dixon!" sneered Pete Sully. "Look, he's away behind already!"

"You must do it, Andy!" cried Harry, paying no attention to the bully's words. "Strike out faster!"

Encouraged by Harry's words, and also by the calling of his brother and Boxy, Andy did really make an extra effort, and before half a mile was covered passed the last two fellows in the race, thus becoming fourth.

Bill Dixon was in the lead, and for a while it looked as if he would stay there. He kept crawling away from all of the others, and at length had left them pretty much behind.

But now Andy showed of what metal he was made. With a spurt he swept by the two ahead of him, and dashed on close at Bill Dixon's heels.

"What did I tell you!" cried Harry. "Go in, Andy, and win!"

Dixon heard the cry, and looked over his shoulder. There was yet almost a half mile to skate, and he was nearly winded. He felt that Andy would pass him, try his best to keep up the pace.

He slowed up, and put out one foot, intending thereby to trip Andy up. But the young contestant saw it just in time, and, with a nimble leap, he cleared the obstruction, and went sailing on, winner by ten yards, while Dixon came in third, the boy behind Andy managing to come up before Dixon could regain his lost headway.

Andy would have reported Dixon for his evil intention; but, as he had won the race, he said nothing; still, the look he gave the bully's toady made that individual sneak out of sight in short order.

And now it was time for the five-mile race, the great-

est of the day. It must be confessed that both Harry's heart and Jack's beat rapidly as they took their places in line with Sully and Milne.

The race was to be two and a half miles up the river, and the same distance back. A skater with a big white flag marked the turning point.

"Are you all ready boys?" questioned old Mr. Grimes, who conducted the races personally. "Every skate in good order and properly fastened on?"

"Yes, sir," came first from one and then another.

"Then, go! And good luck go with you!"

They were off, side by side, not a single one a foot ahead or behind. It was undoubtedly the best start of the day.

"Now show 'em what you can do, Sully!"

"Shake 'em up, Milne!"

"Strike out faster, Harry!"

"There goes Jack Bascoe ahead!"

The last cry proved true. Jack had made a splurge, and was now nearly a yard ahead of the other three, who, at the end of the first mile, were still closely bunched.

Then Milne put on steam and went ahead for fully a mile, with Jack behind him, and Harry and Sully side by side in the rear. But the dude of the town could not keep up the pressure, and suddenly, long before the turning point was reached, he collapsed and dropped behind and out of the race entirely.

"Only three now!"

"And Jack Bascoe still in the lead!"

"Sully is crawling up to him!"

It was true. Pete Sully's long legs were working with wonderful rapidity, and he was slowly forging ahead of Harry, despite the other's apparent best efforts to keep up.

"Jack's going to win that race!" cried Andy, with pardonable pride.

"It certainly looks so," returned Boxy. "Well, he deserves it, although I kind of hoped Harry would get that prize and be able to turn it into money."

"Jack said he would lend Harry the money if he won the medal," said Andy. "He said it just before they started."

"Good for Jack," returned Boxy. "In that case I certainly don't begrudge him the token."

On and on went the skaters, until the turning point was reached, and Jack shot around it in as small a curve as he could make without slipping, and directly on his heels followed Sully.

But the bully and Jack were both becoming winded, and they could not keep up the pace. Harry, on the contrary, had got his second wind, and now he put on a spurt that brought him up yard by yard to the others.

"Harry Webb is gaining on them!"

"Sully is losing ground on Bascoe!"

"Harry is up to Sully!"

"What's the matter with Jack? Is he out of wind?"

"He must be. See! see! Harry is right on Jack's heels!"

"Harry has passed them all!" yelled Boxy, in wild delight. "Didn't I tell you he would do it?"

"They've got half a mile to go yet!"

"Never mind, he's getting farther ahead each minute!"

Boxy was right. Harry was now putting forth every effort. He had just forged ahead of Jack, and it certainly looked as if he would come in a winner.

But Jack was picking up. He was determined to beat Sully, even if he could not gain on his friend.

A couple of rods were passed, and Harry was almost sure of winning, when suddenly a wild, girlish cry rang out across the river.

Harry looked to his left and saw a sight that thrilled him with horror.

Half-way between himself and the shore was a long, narrow spot where the ice was very thin. A girl, scarcely ten years of age, had ventured on this ice, and broken through, and was now struggling madly to save herself from drowning.

Evidently all the other people on the river were so interested in the race that they had not seen the accident nor heard her cries for aid.

"My gracious!" burst from Harry's lips, and then, forgetting all about the race, and the prize he wished so much to win, he swept from the straight course in a semicircle toward the hapless victim.

Thinking something had gone wrong, perhaps, with Harry's skates, Jack kept on, determined to win the medal from Sully, if he possibly could. Sully saw what the real trouble was, but, thoroughly selfish, kept on, hoping to win by accident if not otherwise.

"Help me!" screamed the girl, as she saw Harry approaching. "Help me, Harry Webb!"

"It's Boxy's sister, as sure as I live!" cried the boy, in horror. "Keep up, Minnie, and I'll save you! Catch hold of the ice, and don't let the current carry you under!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

It was a thrilling moment in Harry Webb's life when he saw his chum's sister in her extremely perilous situation.

He well understood how hard it was to keep up one's courage in that freezing cold water, with the strong current trying its best to drag one under the ice.

"Don't let go, Minnie!" he shouted, and just then his own voice sounded strange to him. "Hold fast! I'll be there in another minute!"

With powerful strokes he swept nearer and nearer. The somewhat thin ice bent and cracked beneath his weight, but to this he paid scant heed.

In his pocket, Harry had a couple of skate straps he had brought along in case anything should happen to his clamp skates. These straps he now buckled together, and wound one end around his hand.

Getting as close to the hole as he dared, he threw out the end of the straps.

"Catch the buckle, Minnie!" he cried. "Can you reach it, or shall I come closer?"

The poor girl in the water tried to speak, but the words would not come, so benumbed and cold was she.

But she put out one hand convulsively, and caught the strap just above the buckle.

"Now put the other hand on the ice, and I'll pull you up," went on Harry. "Steady, now, or the ice will——"

Crack! crack! crash!

The ice around the brave boy had suddenly given way, and on the instant he found himself plunged into the chilling water head first.

He went down several feet, and then turned and came up. The shock to his system, all overheated from racing, was terrible, and for a few seconds he seemed fairly paralyzed.

But he retained his hold on the straps, and by their aid was quickly at Minnie Woodruff's side.

"Oh, Harry!" the girl burst out.

She could not say more, but those two words just then meant a good deal.

"I'll save you yet, Minnie," he returned, as he caught her around the waist. "Hold fast to me."

"I—I can't! I'm so co—cold!"

"I'll hold you, then," he went on. "Help! help! help!"

His cry rang out loud and clear across the frozen river. Fortunately, several had seen him turn from the race course, and watched where he had gone. These persons were now hurrying to the scene of the accident as fast as possible.

"It's Harry Webb!"

"He's trying to save Minnie Woodruff from drowning!"

"What a plucky boy to leave the race and go in after her!"

These and numerous other shouts went up. Then, as

the little crowd drew closer, they speculated upon how they should aid the struggling pair.

"Somebody get a rope!"

"We want a board worse than anything! You can't pull them out with a rope."

In the meantime one boy threw out the end of his long tippet to Harry, who caught one end of it and tied it about Minnie's wrist.

Then, suddenly, a boy came skating toward the crowd, carrying a long board. It was Boxy Woodruff!

"Here's a board to get 'em out with!" he cried. "Now if—Minnie!"

He had not previously recognized his sister, and now at the discovery he almost fainted.

"Minnie! and Harry has gone in after her!" he murmured. "Oh, I hope they both get out safe!"

Willing hands had taken the board and shoved out one end toward the big hole in the ice.

"Get back!" shouted a cool-headed man. "Get back, every one, or there'll be a dozen more in together!"

The warning came none too soon, for already the ice was cracking in a dozen directions. The crowd started back, only the man and Boxy remaining at the outer end of the board, to prevent it slipping around.

Bringing every ounce of his youthful strength into play, Harry caught hold of the end of the board, and slowly pulled himself out of the water, with Minnie half-clinging, half-held to his side. The ice groaned dismally, but did not break, and in a few seconds the two were safe once more.

Boxy caught Minnie in his arms just as the exhausted girl was on the point of fainting. A crowd of admiring boys surrounded Harry.

"Good for you, Harry!"

"That was well done!"

"My! but he's got nerve, hasn't he?"

"I—I guess I had better get ho—home!" chattered the hero of the occasion. "I'm almost fro—frozen!"

"Here, take my overcoat!" It was Jack Bascoe who spoke. "You're a brick, Harry! I never dreamed that you had turned out to save Minnie Woodruff."

"Who won the ra—race?" questioned Harry, as he slid into the overcoat in short order.

"I did. But you were ahead, and you deserve——"

Jack broke off short, as a sleigh drawn by a pair of coal black horses dashed up on the ice. It was old Mr. Grimes' turnout.

"Get in here, and put the girl in, too!" cried the old fellow, who sat on the front seat beside the driver. "Be quick! The sooner you both get home the better. You'll catch your death of cold out here on the river."

And Minnie Woodruff and Harry were bundled into the back seat by Boxy and the others without delay; the robes were piled over them, and then off they spun for the town.

Luckily, the Woodruff and Webb homesteads were not far distant, and inside of ten minutes both the girl and the boy were in their homes, and being taken care of by their mothers.

Mrs. Webb wished Harry to go bed, but he demurred at this.

"I'm not so frail as all that, mother. I'll go up to your room, where it's warm, and take a good rubbing down and change my clothing, and then I'll be all right. I only hope Minnie gets over it all right."

Harry departed up the stairs, and after giving him a complete change of raiment, Mrs. Webb hurried next door to assist in making Minnie comfortable, for she knew Mrs. Woodruff was rather sickly, and could not do as readily as most women.

She came back inside of half an hour, and found Harry sitting by the dining-room stove, and with him Jack and Andy Bascoe, who had followed old Grimes' sleigh on foot.

"I'm feeling just as well as ever, excepting that I'm awfully tired," said Harry. "How is Minnie?"

"She is abed, but the doctor who was summoned thinks she will recover in a day or two. She was in so long that her whole system was chilled. Mrs. Woodruff is very thankful for what you did."

"Oh, I didn't do any more than any other fair-minded fellow would do," replied Harry, modestly.

"She seems to think so, and so does Boxwell. Mr. Woodruff has not yet come home."

"He is a genuine hero," put in Andy. "He ran a great risk, and all the boys say so."

Jack agreed with him on this point, and a little later, before departing for dinner, spoke of the gold medal he had won.

"That medal ought to go to you, Harry," he said. "And, by rights, I ought to get the second prize, that Sully got. It isn't fair to do you out of your winnings in this way."

"But you won the medal; I didn't," said Harry.

"But you would have won it, though."

"That's so," said Andy.

"I don't care so much for the medal, but you know I was wishing for the money, so I could go with you fellows on that tour——" began Harry.

"Well, if that's all, I'm going to fix you up on that score," said Jack, decidedly. "I'll keep the medal and give you the trip money——"

"No, sir!" cried Harry. "I'm going to get that money myself—by earning it or otherwise, or else I don't go. That's settled."

And all the talking the Bascoe brothers could do would not shake him from this determination.

It was growing toward evening when Boxy's father, who had been on a trip to New York, came home. He was completely taken aback by the news that awaited him, and very solicitous concerning his only daughter's welfare.

He remained by Minnie's side all of that evening, and it was not until well into the forenoon of the next day that he ran over to the Webb house.

"My dear Harry, how can I thank you for what you have done?" he cried, as he grasped the young hero warmly by the hand. "You saved Minnie's life!"

"Well, I'm downright glad of it," stammered Harry, not finding anything else to say on the moment.

"Mrs. Woodruff is also very grateful. I would have been over before, but I could not bring myself to leave Minnie's side."

"How is she this morning?" questioned Mrs. Webb.

"Very much better—in fact, completely out of danger," returned the happy father. "Harry, I do not know how to reward you," he went on, still wringing the boy's hand.

"I am not looking for any reward, Mr. Woodruff. I only did what I thought was my duty."

"Nevertheless, you played the part of a real hero, and you deserve a rich reward—more than I or any other man in Rudskill can afford."

"I was glad to save Minnie for friendship's sake."

"I believe you, my boy, but I shall not let it rest there, let me tell you that. In a few days I am going down to your father's store and have a talk with him about you. Boxwell tells me you have said you would like to attend college with him."

"Indeed, Mr. Woodruff, I would, but—but——"

"Never mind the buts, Harry. I'm going to talk with your father about it. Boxwell says he wishes you to take the clerk's place in the store, so as to reduce expenses, but maybe I can fix that up. A bright, brave boy like you deserves a chance in life. Now I must go. By the way, here is a little trifle from Minnie and Mrs. Woodruff which you must not refuse. Boxwell put it in their heads to send it to you."

As Mr. Woodruff finished, he brought forth a sealed

envelope, and thrust it into Harry's hand. Before the boy could utter any protest he was gone.

With his mother looking over his shoulder, Harry tore open the envelope. There were two things inside. One was a card, on which was written:

"Please accept the inclosed for your share of the expense of the coming tour of the Zero Club."

Accompanying the card was a crisp, new twenty-dollar bill.

CHAPTER V.

GETTING READY TO START.

"Twenty dollars!" cried Harry, as he spread out the bill. "What do you think of that, mother?"

"It is a very handsome present, Harry. But ought you to accept the money?"

"I don't know. I don't like to, exactly, but the Woodruffs are rich, and they can easily afford it."

"Still, you had better ask your father about it."

"I will. I'm going down to the store now."

Mr. Webb kept the only flour and feed store in Rudskill. As we have said, he had been unfortunate in his speculations, and now had to live quite frugally to make both ends meet. The business was well established, and he employed a clerk and also a man to drive the wagon.

Harry often helped at the store, it being his duty to carry out small orders and clean up. During the school term he did this work early in the morning and after the school session, but now he did it whenever called upon by his parent.

Mr. Webb had heard all about the proposed tour of the Zero Club, and, as Harry's heart seemed set on accompanying the other boys, he had good-naturedly determined to let his son off for three or four weeks, feeling that the outing would make him more willing than ever to take hold when he came back.

But nothing had been said about the expense, Harry knowing full well that his father could not afford to let him off and give him money besides.

Mr. Webb smiled when his son showed him the card and the twenty-dollar bill.

"Well, I don't know," he said, slowly. "I helped Mr. Woodruff out more than once when I felt rich and he felt poor. I guess you would better keep the money and go and thank them for the gift. It's just what you need for the trip, isn't it?"

"Yes, twenty dollars will more than cover my expenses," said Harry. "And if you say keep the money, let me tell you what I propose to do, father."

"Well?"

"We have reckoned it out, and I can get along on fourteen dollars easily. Now I propose to get Paul Larkins to take my place here for three weeks at two dollars per week and pay him myself. That will help you out, and also give Paul the chance to help his mother, who is down sick."

"But the money is for the trip, Harry," said Mr. Webb, although well pleased at his son's generous proposal.

"Well, I count that an expense of the trip, getting a substitute while I am away."

"Well, if you say so, let it be so," returned Mr. Webb, as he turned away to wait on a customer.

When Harry was done work he went back home and fixed up, and then called on the Woodruffs. Blushing furiously, he took both Mrs. Woodruff and Minnie by the hand, and thanked them for their gift. Somehow he

was glad to escape the praise they showered upon him for what he had done.

He left the house with Boxy, who linked arms with him in the most brotherly fashion.

"We'll be greater chums than ever now," said Boxy. "I've talked it over with father, and you are to go to college with me when we graduate at Rudskill Academy. But never mind that now. You'll go on the tour, then?"

"Will I! Of course I will!" cried Harry. "I'm fairly bubbling over with enthusiasm on that point."

"Come on and hunt up the Bascoes, then, and we'll talk matters over."

It was not difficult to find Andy and Jack, and to them matters were quickly explained. The quartet composing the Zero Club at once made their way to the meeting-room, and here began an animated discussion of plans regarding the proposed tour.

Andy got out a long slip of paper, and on this were put down the many articles to be taken along—blankets, skates, guns and ammunition, as well as flour, tea, coffee, sugar, salt, spices, canned goods, and half-a-dozen tin plates and various kitchen utensils. These goods were to be packed on a sled belonging to Boxy, the sled to be tied to the iceboat on the way up the river.

Then came the question of the iceboat. As they intended to use the craft but a short portion of the way going and coming, it was decided to knock it together as cheaply as possible.

"I have got an old sail or two," said Jack. "And we can get some old lumber and iron runners from the ruins

of the old blacksmith-shop that stands on that property father bought last fall."

"And I've got rope enough," said Harry. "Father's mill garret is full of it, so much comes around packages."

Then came the question of when they should start, and it was unanimously agreed that the following Monday morning would be best. That would give them just enough time to build the iceboat and make other necessary preparations.

Andy was appointed treasurer of the club, and that afternoon each of the boys paid over to him exactly twelve dollars and a half, so that, with his own money, he had fifty dollars to expend for the tour. The building of the iceboat was begun without delay at the old blacksmith-shop, the land to which sloped down to the river's edge.

The news that the four boys were going off for nearly a month's outing soon spread, and many came down to the blacksmith-shop to see what was going on.

Among the crowd was Pete Sully, who turned up his nose at the boat the boys were building.

"If I couldn't build a better boat than that I'd drown myself," he sneered. "I'll bet it won't sail a foot."

"Build a boat and try your speed against her," said Jack, lightly. "Talk is well enough, but actions go further."

"Maybe you think I can't build a boat," retorted Sully, angrily.

"I'm not thinking in that direction," returned Jack. "I am busy with my own affairs."

"I'll build a boat and show you," growled Sully, and he went off with Dixon, his ever-present toady.

"Do you think he'll build a boat?" questioned Harry, who was hammering away on one of the runners of the skeleton craft.

"No; he hasn't brains enough," put in Boxy. "I don't believe he could drive a nail without splitting the board, if he tried his best."

"It's a case of sour grapes," remarked Andy. "He is jealous because we are going off for a good time."

"Well, he and his crowd can go off on their own account if they wish," said Jack. "We are not hindering them."

"Maybe he will take it into his head to go off, after we are gone," said Andy. "He always was a great hand to imitate somebody else."

It was fortunate that the boys had the old blacksmith-shop to work in, for that day it began to snow furiously, and before nightfall the ground was covered to the depth of six or eight inches. This, on top of the layer already packed down, made elegant sleighing.

"We must have a few more rides on my toboggan before we leave," said Harry.

"Let's spend Saturday evening on the hill," suggested Andy. "We can go early, and still have time to make final preparations for our tour before we go to bed."

The new fall of snow caused plenty of snowballing to occur in the town. The Zero Club took full part in this, and had one battle which was not soon forgotten.

It was started by Bill Dixon, who had been "laying to

get even" with Harry ever since the episode on the toboggan slide. Dixon hung around Harry's corner on the morning following the snowstorm, in company with half-a-dozen lesser lights of the Sully crowd. Under his arms he held several "soakers," almost as hard as flint.

When Harry hurried out of the gate on his way to do the morning work at his father's store, Dixon took careful aim, and let drive with all of his might.

The hard snowball took Harry in the left shoulder, hurting him not a little. Had it landed in his face it might have put out his eye or broken his nose.

Harry staggered back, and Dixon, chuckling over the success of his shot, dodged behind a high board fence.

"Give it to him, fellows!" he cried, excitedly. "Give it to him in the head!"

Several more snowballs were thrown, but Harry was now on his guard. He dodged them, and began to run across the street, gathering up some snow as he ran.

"What's up, Harry?" cried Boxy, coming out of his house at the moment.

"Some fellow hit me terribly hard in the shoulder. Come on!" returned Harry, and, in honor bound to help a fellow member of the club, Boxy ran after his chum.

At the end of the fence they caught sight of Dixon and the others. A fierce fusillade of snowballs from both sides followed. Harry hit Dixon in the chest, and Boxy knocked off his cap.

"Go for 'em!" shouted Dixon, in a rage. "Hullo, there, Pete!" he yelled to Sully, who was out looking for

him, and the principal of the gang soon joined the forces against the two members of the Zero Club.

Two to seven was an uneven contest, and it was not long before Harry and Boxy felt they were getting the worst of it.

"If only Jack and Andy were here!" panted Boxy. "Unless they come, we'll have to turn tail and run."

"I shan't run," said Harry, firmly. "Let's direct all of our shots at Sully and Dixon. They are the leaders of the crowd, and if we can frighten them back the others will quickly follow."

Boxy caught the suggestion, and it was carried out immediately. The result was that inside of two minutes Sully got three snowballs in his face and neck, and Dixon half a dozen all over him.

"Hi! that ain't fair!" howled Dixon. "They're throwing at me and nobody else!"

"Another volley on Dixon," whispered Harry. "That's the weak point now."

And out flew the hard, white balls, and the bully's toady received two more, this time both in the neck. The snow went down inside of his collar, causing him to yell from the cold.

"I—I can't stand this!" he sputtered. "Why don't you fellows do something?"

"Let's charge on them!" cried Sully, angrily. "Come on—everybody take all the snowballs he can carry."

The seven loaded up with amunition at once, and they sallied forth. But, to their dismay, Jack and Andy Bascoe had just arrived on the scene, followed up by

Pickles Johnsing, the colored youth. These three were not slow to take in the situation, and they sailed in vigorously.

"Dis am most lubly sport!" cried Pickles. "How yo' like dat, Sully? Ki! hi! Ain't dat jess elegant, Dixon? An' heah's one fo' you, Len Spencer, fo' callin' me a coon!"

And Pickles rushed to the front, followed by Andy and Jack, and compelling Sully and his crowd to retreat in spite of themselves. Aided by Boxy and Harry, they fought so vigorously that inside of ten minutes the bully and his chums were put completely to rout.

Sully and Dixon, and also Len Spencer, Pickles' particular enemy, were greatly enraged over the way they had been used. They threatened vengeance on the members of the Zero Club. How they carried out their threat will be seen later on.

CHAPTER VI.

LAST RIDE ON THE BUSTER.

By Saturday noon the iceboat was finished. It was nearly thirty feet long, and boasted of a mainsail only. It was by no means a handsome craft, and the boys did not doubt but what there were many crafts on the river that could outspeed her.

"But she'll be safe and sure," remarked Jack, "and that is what we want."

"We must christen her before we make a trial trip this afternoon," said Andy. "We have suggested a hundred names, and not chosen any."

"Let us put each name on a slip of paper, and put all the slips in a hat," suggested Boxy. "Then Harry draw one, and that shall be the name."

This was at once agreed to, and nine names went into Andy's cap. Harry fumbled around, and finally drew a slip out and read it aloud.

"The *Icicle!* That suits me. Who wrote it down?"

"I did," said Jack.

"It's a good name for an iceboat," put in Boxy. "Hurrah for the Zero Club and the *Icicle!*" he shouted.

And three cheers were given with a will.

Directly after dinner the four boys shoved the clumsy craft down to the ice, and made a trial trip on her across

the river and back and two miles up the shore. The *Icicle* behaved very well, and Jack declared that they would have no trouble in reaching their destination on her.

As soon as the trial trip was over they separated to get their various things, for they were determined that all should be in readiness for the start Monday morning at sunrise, and that nothing was to be done on the Sabbath.

Blankets, skates, and other things were taken down to the meeting-room in the Bascoe barn. Andy and Jack had shotguns of their own, and Boxy had a rifle. Harry had no firearms, but borrowed from his father a small shotgun. Each of the boys also provided himself with fishing lines, and Jack took along a spear for spearing through a hole in the ice.

"The sled will be pretty well heaped up, I'm thinking," remarked Boxy, who was doing the packing.

"Won't it tip over if it's too highly packed?" asked Andy.

"We'll put a bent stick across the top," said Jack. "That will keep it from tipping only so far."

"We want to make sure that nothing is forgotten," said Harry. "It would be fine to get miles from any house, and then find that you had forgotten something you wanted the worst way."

"I've got the list, and I've checked off the articles," returned Andy. "I've even got the forks and knives and spoons down."

"Have you got a big carving-knife? We can't do without that."

"By gracious! I never thought of that!" exclaimed Andy, his face reddening. "We wouldn't be able to cut up a bear even if we shot him."

"I've brought a hunting-knife," put in Boxy. "See here—a regular Mohawk scalping steel. Wah! wah! Me take white man's scalp and dry him hair for smoking tobac!" he went on, dancing around and flourishing the knife in true Indian fashion—according to a dime novel he had once had the patience to wade through.

"Beware of Bloody Ben of Digger's Gulch!" shrieked Andy, in reply, and he caught up his gun. "He is out to avenge the murder of his twenty-fɔ-o-ur bro-o-thers!"

"Here, Andy, don't point that gun at any one," put in Jack, sternly.

"It isn't loaded, Jack."

"Never mind, put it down. There are too many accidents of that sort, where somebody didn't think the gun was loaded."

Andy put down the firearm, and packing was resumed, Jack going into the house to obtain a carving-knife for the trip.

At last the sled was loaded, and covered over with an old rubber horse-blanket which Mr. Woodruff gave to Boxy. The load was strapped on as tightly as possible, and over it was placed the stick Jack had mentioned, the two ends sticking out and downward nearly two feet on either side.

"Now we are all ready for the start," observed Andy,

as he surveyed what had been done. "How I wish it were Monday morning, so that we wouldn't have to wait."

"You mustn't forget the rides to-night on the *Buster,*" said Harry. "It may be the last time we can use the toboggan this winter."

"Oh, I guess the snow will keep until we get back," said Andy. "But I am right ready for the sport to-night, nevertheless."

The packed sled was locked up in the barn, and the boys repaired to their various homes for supper.

"Well, Harry, all ready?" smiled Mrs. Webb, who took a keen interest in her son's doings.

"All ready, mother," he returned. "Is supper ready? We are going tobogganing for the last time to-night."

"Yes, you can have supper at once, Harry. But I want some wood brought in first."

"That's so! I didn't mean to forget it!" he cried, and, dashing out into the woodshed, which he had piled high with split wood ready for the stove, the boy brought in an armful. "Paul Larkins has promised to bring in wood and do errands for you while I am away," he said. "So you won't miss me so very much."

"Yes, I will miss you, Harry," returned Mrs. Webb, affectionately.

"Oh, yes, I know. And I'll miss you, too," he replied, throwing his arms about her neck and kissing her. "It will seem awfully queer to be away from home."

"You must take good care of yourself."

"I'll try to do that, mother."

Harry did not spend much time at the supper table,

"Jump for your lives!"

(See page 53)

and, his hasty meal finished, he brought out the *Buster,* and examined the toboggan to see if it was in good trim for the evening's sport. Little did he dream of the fearful peril a ride on the long, low sled was to bring him and the others.

Boxy came over a moment later, and together they dragged the *Buster* off toward the coasting hills. They had to pass the Bascoe homestead, and here Boxy let out the peculiar whistle of the club for Andy and Jack.

"They say the Doublehill course is as smooth as glass," said Andy, as he came out with a piece of cake in his hand. "Some of the folks don't dare go down it."

"I'm not afraid," cried Harry. "Are you?"

All of the boys agreed that they were not. Each took hold of the rope, and they soon reached the top of the long double hill, where a bright bonfire was already burning, although it was still almost daylight.

"We ought to have a brake of some sort, I suppose," mused Jack, as he surveyed the shining course. "It does look awfully slippery."

"Oh, go ahead!" put in Boxy, impatiently. "I guess if we tumble off it won't kill us."

He sprang upon the toboggan, and, seeing this, Andy and Jack followed. Harry gave the customary push and clung fast, and away they started down the first of the two hills.

Whiz went the *Buster* over the smooth surface, rushing along with a speed that fairly took away their breath.

"Talk about cannon-ball speed!" cried Boxy. "A cannon-ball couldn't catch us!"

"Hark!" cried Jack. "What was that whistle?"

"It's a train on the railroad," replied Harry. "It's the extra Saturday night express! I forgot all about it," he went on, with a little gasp.

"We'll have to turn off at the tracks," put in Andy, nervously.

"If we can," said Jack. "We are going so fast that perhaps it can't be done."

"We must do it!" cried Boxy, in alarm.

"Yes! yes! we must!"

It was easy enough to say they must, but how could they? The toboggan was rushing on faster than ever. Over the brow of the second hill it went, and down the slope toward the tracks. Jack tried to steer to the side, and so did the others, but all in vain.

And now they saw the train rounding the side of the hill, and coming on at full speed, the bell ringing and the whistle blowing to warn everybody off the tracks.

Jack, who was in front, made another desperate effort to change their course. It was useless. Andy, who was next to him, tried to scream out, but the sound stuck in his throat. It looked as if all four of the boys were going to certain destruction.

CHAPTER VII.

BY A HAIR'S BREADTH.

Harry, who half stood up on the end of the flying toboggan, was the only member of the Zero Club who retained his presence of mind.

He saw at a glance that they and the oncoming express train must reach the crossing at about the same time, and in that case the grim locomotive and heavy cars would deal to them certain death.

"Jump for your lives!" he cried out, hoarsely. "Jump, every one of you!"

His tone was so decisive that the other three acted on it almost mechanically. Jack, who was in front, leaped first, and after him came all the others in a heap.

Over and over they rolled, each trying to shield himself as much as he could by the overcoat he wore. Jack went down to the bottom of the hill on his head, and poor Andy came over him, striking his forehead on a railroad tie, the blow rendering him unconscious.

Boxy slid along on his chest to one side, and crashed into a mass of brush with such force that his clothing was torn to ribbons, and his face and hands were scratched in a dozen places.

Harry struck on his back, and turned half-a-dozen different ways before he could stop himself. When

finally he did come to a halt, it was within two feet of the railroad tracks.

The powerful locomotive rushed past, followed by the tender and two cars. Then there was a series of sharp jerks as the lever was reversed by the engineer, the tracks were sanded, and the long train came to a sudden halt. The conductor and several brakemen were out almost instantly, demanding to know what was the matter.

"Come pretty near running over that crowd!" cried out the engineer. "If they had not jumped, I reckon I would have killed most of 'em."

"I don't see any toboggan," returned the conductor.

"I smashed that to kindling wood. There's part of it on the cowcatcher, and the rest is on the other side of the track."

"By George! that's so. You can count yourselves mighty lucky, boys," went on the conductor, to Jack, who was getting up slowly.

"I suppose so," returned Jack, briefly, and then he turned to where Andy was lying, and bent over his younger brother. "Andy! Andy! are you hurt very badly?"

"Jack!" murmured the half-unconscious boy. "Oh, my head!"

"He struck it on the ties, I guess," said one of the brakemen. "It's bleeding a bit. Better rub some snow on it."

By this time Harry and Boxy came limping to the scene, both presenting a most deplorable sight, Boxy especially, with half of his clothing torn from his back,

"We can't wait," said the conductor. "You want to be more careful how you coast down this hill," he went on, to the crowd that was beginning to collect. "If you don't, we'll have the worst kind of an accident here some day."

He motioned to the engineer, and hurried to one of the cars, followed by the other train hands. In a few seconds the express was once more on its way.

The crowd around the boys kept growing, as it spread that an accident had occurred.

"Harry Webb's toboggan was smashed by the express!"

"Andy Bascoe was almost killed!"

"Every one of them was shaken up badly!"

Under the tender care of Jack and the others, Andy soon came to himself. But his head ached fearfully, and he could hardly stand on his feet.

"Yo' sit on my bread-shubble, and I'll ride yo' home," said Pickles Johnsing, who happened to be on hand. "Yo' can sit on an' hole him, Jack, if yo' wants to," he continued.

So Jack got on, and made it comfortable for Andy, whose head he had bound up with his own handkerchief and several others. Although they felt sore in every joint, Harry and Boxy insisted on helping Pickles drag the sled to its destination.

"The *Buster* is smashed to bits," said Boxy on the way.

"I know it," returned Harry. "But I don't care," he added, with a shudder. "I couldn't bear to ride on her again after that narrow escape."

"Nor I. My! I ain't done trembling yet," was Boxy's confession, in a low tone.

The news of the accident had preceded them, and they found Mr. and Mrs. Bascoe anxiously awaiting their appearance.

"My boy!" cried the mother, as she caught Andy in her arms. "And you were almost killed?"

"Oh, no, mother; I struck my head, that's all," replied Andy, putting on a bold front. "I'll be all right by to-morrow."

Andy limped into the house, and a servant was dispatched for a doctor. When the physician arrived he declared that the bruise was not serious. The shock to the boy's system was worse, and he must remain quiet for a day or two.

"We won't be able to go away on Monday morning," said Jack to the others. "Father says we had better wait until Tuesday or Wednesday."

"I don't care," said Harry. "I am thankful we escaped being killed."

"So am I," put in Boxy. "And I just as lief wait, for I'm too stiff to start off on a tour just yet."

"How is Minnie?"

"Oh, she's as well as ever."

Sunday passed quietly, although the escape of the four boys was the talk of the town. On Monday Andy was found to be greatly improved, and it was decided that the start up the river should be made on the following morning at sunrise.

"It won't do to delay much longer," said Jack, "for it

looks as if we might have a heavy snowstorm before long, and that would block our chances of using the *Icicle.*"

"Oh, I hope it doesn't snow until we are settled in our camp!" cried Boxy. "I was just longing for that ice-boat ride!"

Even at the last moment, the boys found several things to do which had previously escaped their notice. Some stores had been forgotten, and not a bit of medicine, arnica or court-plaster had been packed with the things. All these, however, were procured, and late Monday evening Jack declared themselves prepared to depart.

It may well be imagined that none of the boys slept well that night. Each was anxious for the start, and all heads were filled with visions of glorious times to come. What a great and grand thing this tour of the Zero Club was to be!

Long before daylight Harry was up and dressed. His mother also arose, and saw to it that her son had a good warm breakfast before he departed.

"You won't get another like it for some time to come," she said, with a sorry little smile. "Mark my words."

"Nonsense, mother," he laughed. "Just think of the game we'll shoot and the fish we'll catch."

"Perhaps, Harry. Remember one thing, my boy; do not run into danger."

"I'll try to remember what you say."

Harry had barely finished when Boxy came over, and, with a final good-by, the two started off for the Bascoe homestead.

They found the other two members of the club waiting for them. Jack had the well-packed sled out of the barn, and Andy stood beside him, a trifle pale, but otherwise as well as ever.

"Just a fine morning!" cried Jack. "And the wind blowing exactly in the right direction."

"But snow isn't far off—my father said so," returned Harry. "He said we would be lucky to reach Rock Island Lake without catching a downfall."

"We won't lose another minute!" burst in Boxy. "Come on, boys! Good-by, everybody, and three cheers for the tour of the Zero Club!"

The backyard rang with the cheers, and then, with caps waving, the four boys moved off, dragging the sled behind them.

It certainly was a fine morning, the rising sun sending long glittering rays over the crust of the frozen snow. The wind was a trifle cold, but this the quartet did not mind. For them, just now, it was much better than no wind at all.

"I calculate that we can reach Hammerstone by twelve o'clock," said Jack. "And that will be half the journey up the river."

"And we can reach Rudd's Landing by nightfall," put in Boxy. "And start across country for the lake the first thing to-morrow. Did you send word to Barton Coils about taking care of the iceboat for us?"

"Yes, and he said we could stay at his place all night if we wished. I reckon it will be better than trying to put up a hut just for one night."

Boxy demurred a little at this. He wished to go to camping just as quickly as possible. But the others overruled him.

"We'll get camping enough, never fear," remarked Andy. "Remember, we'll have to put in one night on this side of the lake shore before we strike a suitable place to camp."

As soon as they reached the vicinity of the river, Harry ran ahead to unfasten the iceboat, and get the craft in readiness for the start.

A few seconds later the others heard him give a cry of wild alarm. He soon reappeared among them.

"The *Icicle* is gone!" was the startling intelligence he brought.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STOLEN ICEBOAT.

The other members of the Zero Club came to a dead halt.

"Gone!" burst out Andy and Boxy in a breath, while Jack looked as if he had not heard aright.

"Yes, gone!" repeated Harry.

"But I locked it fast to the piling!" exclaimed Jack. "You have the key."

"I don't care! she's gone, and I can't see anything of her."

Without another word, the quartet hurried down to the edge of the ice. It was just as Harry had announced, the iceboat was nowhere in sight. Each of the boys looked at his comrades.

"What does it mean?" asked Boxy.

"It means that the *Icicle* has been stolen!" cried Jack.

"Stolen?"

"Yes. It was locked up tight enough. Somebody has come here and either broken the lock or else had a key to fit it. Boys, we are in a hole!"

The faces of the Zero Club fell. Without their iceboat, with which to make the journey up the river, what was to be done?

"Who would have taken her?" questioned Boxy, afte

running out on the froezn river and looking up and down anxiously.

"Maybe some tramps," suggested Andy. "I saw several of them hanging around yesterday."

"I saw those tramps, too," returned Harry. "It would be just like them, if they wanted to go to some other place on the river."

"It's a real shame!" muttered Jack. "Our trip spoiled at the very start."

"If we only knew in what direction the boat had gone we might go after her," said Andy. "Our skates are on the sled, you know."

"That's the ticket!" burst out Boxy. "Give me my skates without delay. It's ten to one they went off this morning, and so they can't be very far away."

"I have an idea," said Jack. "Supposing two of us skate up the river, and two down, on the lookout? We'll go, say three or four miles, and if we don't see anything we can return here."

"All right," returned Harry. "We can't afford to let anybody run off with the *Icicle*."

While the boys were talking over this plan in an excited way, and getting out their skates and putting them on, the well-known figure of Pickles Johnsing appeared in sight. The colored youth was running as fast as his short, fat legs would permit.

"Mos' dun missed yo'!" he gasped. "An' I made up my mind to see yo' off, suah!"

"We're not off just yet, Pickles," said Jack.

"No? I t'ought yo' wuz gwine soon as de sun shone up?"

"Our iceboat has been stolen. We just found it out," said Boxy. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Wot? De *Isticle* gone?" ejaculated the colored youth, with his big eyes rolling in wonder. "Yo' don't say! Who dun tuk her?"

"That's what we want to know," said Andy.

Pickles began to blink his eyes, as if in deep thought. Then suddenly he slapped his thigh with his broad hand.

"By de boots! I fink I know who dun tuk de *Isticle!*" he roared.

"You do?" came in concert from the members of the Zero Club.

"Yes, sah!"

"Who?"

"Sully, Dixon and dat low-down Len Spencer!"

The boys started.

"What makes you think so?" asked Jack, catching the colored youth by the arm.

"I heered dem a-talkin' 'bout it las' night on de toboggan-slide. Sully said he would like ter break up yo'r gwine away, and Dixon said de *Isticle* was tied up down heah, an' da could git hold ob it easy enought an' put yo' in de hole."

"That settles it!" cried Harry, angrily. "Our old enemies are at work against us. They took the iceboat just to break up our tour."

"But they sha'n't break it up!" cried Boxy. "I'll go on foot first!"

"So will I," joined in Andy.

"If we only knew where they had taken the *Icicle* we might go after them," said Jack. "I don't believe in letting them have their own way."

"Nor I—after working so hard on the iceboat," added Boxy. "Pickles, did they say anything about where they might go?"

"No, da didn't," replied the colored youth, slowly. "But, hol' on—Len Spencer said he was gwine down to Lumberton to-day fo' his father——"

"Then that's where they have gone!" put in Jack, hurriedly. "Of course, they wouldn't dare go up the river, knowing we were bound that way. I'll bet a dollar they are on the way to Lumberton this minute!"

"I believe you," said Harry. "Shall we go after them?"

"Of course!"

"Certainly!"

"Can we catch them?"

"We ought to be able to do so on our skates. The wind is almost full against them, so they will have to do a bit of tacking, while we can skate straight ahead."

With frantic haste, the four boys completed the task of putting on their skates. Pickles had his pair along with him, and put them on also.

"I'se gwine wid yo', if you lets me," he said. "Maybe yo'll want some help if yo' gits in a muss."

"Certainly, come on, Pickles," said Jack.

The sled was left in a safe place, and then, without fur-

ther delay, the five boys started down the river toward Lumberton, a small settlement ten miles distant.

At first but slow progress was made, owing to the stiffness felt by the members of the Zero Club from the toboggan accident. But gradually they warmed up to the work, and then they glided over the smooth ice rapidly. Pickles, who was a good skater, despite the shortness of his legs, kept close to Jack's side.

"I wish we were provided with clubs," said Boxy. "We may have a rough time of it with Sully and his gang. He hasn't forgotten how we got the best of him at snowballing, and most likely he's prepared to fight us off."

"He'll give up the iceboat fast enough, never fear," returned Jack. "You must remember, I can have him arrested for stealing our property if I want to."

"But you wouldn't do that, would you?" asked Harry.

"Not unless he got positively ugly. But he must be taught to remember that we intend to stand no nonsense."

On and on down the frozen river swept the five boys, until Rudskill was left far behind. The sun mounted higher in the sky, tempering the wind and making skating more agreeable.

"We'll soon be up to Thompson's Bend, and then we'll have a straight course before us," said Andy.

"If I'd thought, I would have taken the field-glasses from the pack," said Boxy. "Then we could have seen the *Icicle* even if she was miles off."

"I kin see dat *Isticle* fur 'nouf, nebber fear," said

Pickles. "My eyes hab been trained since I was knee-high to a grasshopper."

The bend Jack had mentioned was reached five minutes later, and in a bunch the boys swept around the last projecting headland. A straight course for twelve miles lay before them.

"There's the *Icicle!*" cried Andy, suddenly.

"Where? where?" came from the others.

"Over to the east shore! See, they are tacking this way!"

"You are right!" returned Harry. "And there is Bill Dixon standing at the bow."

"An' dat low-down Len Spencer in de back, alongside ub Pete Sully!" added Pickles. "Didn't I dun tole yo' da was comin' dis way?"

"They have discovered us!" exclaimed Boxy, a second later. "See, they intend to turn on the other tack. Come on, fellows, we mustn't give them a chance to get away!"

He started off at full speed on his skates, and the others quickly followed.

The iceboat was all of an eighth mile off, and speeding over the river as fast as the wind would carry her. Those on board had discovered the owners as quickly as they themselves had been revealed, and were now making frantic efforts to get out of the reach of their pursuers.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TOUR BEGINS.

"I wonder if they will attempt to fight?" asked Harry, as he swept on beside Jack.

"I hardly think so," was the reply. "But if they do, we are five to three."

"I own dat Len Spencer a lickin'," put in Pickles. "He won't dare say one word to dis child or he dun cotch it, suah."

"Don't start a fight," warned Jack, earnestly. "We have the law on our side, and that's enough."

By this time half the distance toward the *Icicle* had been covered. During this interval those on board the iceboat had managed to swing about the main sheet. It was now filling, and the craft was beginning to draw slowly away from them.

"Stop there!" shouted Jack, at the top of his lungs, and the others joined in the cry.

"Good-by!" shouted Sully, derisively. "Hope you enjoy skating!"

"We'll have you locked up if you don't stop!" yelled Boxy. "That is our property you are running off with!"

"Rats!" returned Sully, but he and his companions were not a little disturbed by Boxy's plain statement of facts.

"We must put on more steam!" urged Harry. "If they once catch the wind fairly they will give us a nice chase across to the Lights."

"Never mind, we'll catch them on the next tack!" said Andy.

Nevertheless, the five boys put on a burst of speed which brought them to within a couple of hundred feet of the *Icicle*.

"They are going to tack back!" cried Harry. "Now if we try——"

"They are going to turn round and sail right with the wind!" burst in Jack. "Hurry up, or we'll lose them and have to follow them to Rudskill, and goodness only knows how much farther!"

Jack was right. Sully had given the order, and all hands on the Icicle were aiding in turning her bow up the river.

The clumsy craft swung around in the wind while they were still just out of reach. Then the mainsail again caught the breeze, and off moved the ice-boat at a livelier speed than ever.

"We're beaten!" gasped Andy.

"No, we are not!" shouted Jack. "Come on, fellows! They have got to steer to the right to avoid that open flow over there!"

Away he went, with Harry, Boxy and Pickles at his heels. Andy could not keep up the pace, and dropped a little behind.

Harry felt as if he was once more in the five-mile race, and put forth every ounce of muscle that was in

his sturdy limbs. Gradually he drew ahead of his companions and closer to the iceboat.

Those on the *Icicle* saw him gaining on them, and endeavored to increase their speed. But it was of no avail, the wind subsiding just a trifle when most needed by them.

In another half-minute Harry was alongside of the iceboat. He attempted to jump on board, but Sully sprang at him and pushed him off.

"Keep away, or I'll crack you in the head!" shouted the bully of Rudskill, roughly.

"This is our iceboat, and I am bound to get on board!" returned Harry. "Don't you dare to touch me again, or you'll get the worst of it."

Once more he skated up and caught hold. Sully again tried to push him back. Harry grabbed his arm, and an instant later the bully went sliding down on his back on the hard ice.

"Oh! oh! my back!" howled Sully, in combined fright and pain.

"Serves him right!" returned Harry. "Come on, boys, I've got rid of one of them!" he shouted to his companions.

To avoid the open flow before mentioned, Dixon and Spencer were now tacking once more. This allowed Harry to reach the iceboat a third time, and now he sprang safely aboard.

"Lower the mainsail!" he cried, in a determined voice. "Do you hear, Dixon?"

"But—but——" stammered the bully's toady.

"No buts about it; lower the sail, I tell you, unless you want to be pitched off after Sully!"

Seeing Sully's fate, Dixon was thoroughly cowed, and he hastened to do as Harry had ordered. Hardly had the sail come down than Jack and the others swept up and boarded the *Icicle* in a body.

"Don't—don't kill us!" cried Spencer, who was even a worse coward than Dixon.

"Yo' is a fine fellah to run off wid other folkeses property!" put in Pickles. "I dun reckon Jack an' de rest will send yo' all to prison fo' ten or twelve yeahs!"

"It wasn't my—my fault!" whined Spencer. "Sully put up the job."

"You get right off the boat!" commanded Jack. "And you, too, Dixon!"

"Here, in the middle of the river?" questioned the latter, anxiously.

"Yes, right here."

"You don't mean to leave us way out here, four miles from home, do you?" demanded Sully, as he limped up.

"Yes, leave them here," put in Boxy. "They deserve it."

"It won't hurt them to walk home," said Harry.

"Dat's jess right," added Pickles. "Let dem walk ebery step ub de way."

He and the others sprang on board of the iceboat and began to hoist the mainsail. They had hardly done so when Sully rushed up and tried to hit Jack in the head with his fist.

Pickles sprang forward and pushed the bully's arm

aside. Then he let out with his own fist, and down went Sully flat on his back, while the *Icicle* sailed off, leaving Dixon and Spencer staring at the fate of their leader in dumb amazement.

"That's the time you did it, Pickles!" cried Boxy, approvingly. "My! just look how mad Sully is!"

They looked back and saw that the bully had arisen to his feet and was shaking his fist at them in rage. A moment later they swept around Thompson's Bend, and the trio of defeated ones was lost to view.

"I owe you one for your aid, Pickles," said Jack, with a kindly look at the colored boy, who grinned with pleasure "I shan't forget you."

Pickles cleared his throat several times and looked down at the ice for a moment in silence. The boys saw at once that something was on his mind.

"Say, why can't yo' fellahs take me along!" he burst out suddenly. "Ebery fust-class camp hab got to hab a cook an' general util'ty man around, pap sez, an' he sez I kin go along if youse will hab me. I don't want no pay fo' gwine along, an' I'll do wot I kin to help fill up de larder. I ain't much wid a gun, but I kin trap t'ings, and yo' all knows wot I kin do fishin' an' spearin'. It an't fo' de likes of yo' to wash de dishes and sech, an'—an', to tell de truf, I wants to go powerful bad!"

And Pickles' big, round eyes told very plainly that he spoke the truth. He had had that suggestion on his mind a long while, but he had hesitated to speak for fear of being refused.

The boys looked at each other. They had not thought to include any one but themselves in the proposed outing. But it would be a shame to disappoint Pickles, who had always stood by them and done them more than one favor.

"An' I kin take my banjo and mouf harmonica along," went on the colored youth. "Da will come in mighty handy-like to help kill de long evenings."

"That's so," said Boxy. "And you can give me those lessons you promised me."

"And you can show me how to build those traps you spoke about," added Harry.

"Yes, I want to learn how to trap, too," put in Andy.

"I guess you can go, Pickles," finished up Jack, and it was settled that the colored youth should become one of the party.

Pickles was so delighted that he could hardly contain himself. As soon as Rudskill was reached he ran off to tell his folks and prepare for the trip. He was gone but a short half-hour, and came back with a spear on his shoulder and an old army knapsack strapped on his back.

The sled was brought out and tied on behind the *Icicle,* and then, without further delay, the long-talked-of tour was begun.

"We have lost about two hours," said Jack. "But as the breeze is stronger than ever, perhaps we can make up the lost time before nightfall."

The wind was indeed stronger, and soon Rudskill and the surrounding settlement was left far behind.

Now that the *Icicle* had been recovered and they were at last on the way, all of the boys felt in high spirits. Boxy began to whistle merrily, and soon after Pickles broke out into a comic negro ditty that set them all to roaring.

It was after one o'clock when Hammerstone was reached. It being an hour later than they had anticipated, it was decided that they should procure a lunch to eat on the iceboat instead of stopping off for a meal. Jack procured the stuff—sandwiches and a big mince pie—and soon they were on the way to Rudd's Landing, their stopping place for the night.

By four o'clock Jack calculated that they had traveled three-quarters of the distance from Rudskill.

"And if the wind holds out, we'll be in Rudd's Landing by seven or half-past," he said.

By five o'clock it began to grow both darker and colder. A little later the wind died down somewhat, although it still blew sufficiently strong to keep them spinning on their course.

"Gosh! a cup of coffee wouldn't go bad!" exclaimed Andy, who was taking it easy beside Harry, in the stern. "I'm pretty well chilled."

"It won't be long before we're there, now," replied his brother. "You can see the lights away ahead of us."

On they went through the semi-darkness, for another half mile. They were now approaching a spot where a side creek of considerable dimensions flowed into the river.

Suddenly Pickles, who was in the bow on watch, uttered a cry of terror.

"Turn de boat around!" he screamed. "We is runin' into de open watah!"

The others sprang up and gazed ahead. It was true; the *Icicle* was making directly for a wide opening in the ice, scarcely a hundred yards ahead!

CHAPTER X.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

Every one of the five boys on the iceboat was filled with terror over the danger which confronted them.

At the rate of speed they were going, the *Icicle* would soon reach the edge of the great opening before them, and they well knew that the onward rush would carry them far out into the icy waters.

"Stop her, somebody!" cried Andy. "We will all be drowned!"

"Everybody on the right side!" yelled Jack. "Down with the sail!"

All on board made a rush to the right, and bore heavily on the steering iron on that side. Harry caught hold of the ropes attached to the sail, and untied them. Down came the sheet in a lump, falling partly over the crowd and dragging on the ice beside them.

The *Icicle* began to swing around, and also slowed up. The semi-circular motion caused the sail to get under the steering-iron, and this helped to stay their onward progress

"We'll have to jump!" cried Boxy. "Look how close we are getting!"

"No; we'll stop before we get there," returned Jack. "Hard on the iron, everybody!"

There was a sharp, rasping sound as the *Icicle* struck a bit of lumpy ice, and the clumsy craft trembled from stem to stern. She swung completely around, and came to a halt when within twenty feet of where the dark waters from the side creek rushed along silently.

"My gracious! but that was a close shave!" murmured Boxy, as he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

"Dat am de werry closest shabe wot I ever 'sperienced," returned Pickles. "An' I don't want no moah ub dem!"

"We are not yet out of danger," urged Harry. "An extra heavy puff of wind may come along at any time and carry us over."

"That's so," returned Jack. "Come, on boys, let's get off and push the boat over to the west shore, where I guess we will find a solid strip to pass along on."

His companions were not slow to follow his advice. They lost no time in moving the iceboat back a distance of forty or fifty yards, and, feeling comparatively safe here, they stopped long enough to get out their skates and put them on.

Thus equipped, it was easy to haul the craft around, and, getting behind her, they took turns in pushing her over toward the west shore, where, as Jack had supposed, there was a strip of ice all of fifty yards wide, leading to the solidly frozen river beyond.

"We want to be on the lookout for such places as this," remarked Harry, as they boarded the *Icicle* once more, and hoisted the sail, which was now sadly torn in half-a-

dozen places. "If it hadn't been for Pickles we might all be at the bottom of the river this minute."

And he gave the colored youth a grateful look, which caused Pickles to grin from ear to ear.

After that two of the boys remained at the bow, straining their eyes to see ahead.

But this extra caution was now hardly needed. Owing to the torn condition of the mainsail, the *Icicle* did not move as rapidly as before, and presently, when the wind died down a trifle more the clumsy craft came to a complete standstill.

"Humph! Here's a state of things!" muttered Andy, impatiently. "And we are still two or three miles from Rudd's Landing. What's to do?"

"Get on our skates again and push the *Icicle* along," suggested Jack.

"Boxy, you whistle for a wind, you are such a whistler," laughed Harry, who, as there was no danger attached, was disposed to view the condition of affairs lightly.

"I'm afraid I'd have to whistle a pretty long while," returned Boxy. "My idea is that the wind has gone down for the night, as it frequently does."

"Dat's it, persackly," put in Pickles. "But I jess as lief shobe de *Isticle*—I'se all cold to de marrer ub my bones."

"So am I," cried Jack. "I'm going to push just to get warm. You had better stay on board if you feel played out," he added, to his brother.

"No, I'll get off, too," replied Andy. "But I don't

believe I can shove very much; my head hurts a bit again."

Once more all hands sprang down and donned their skates. Then Pickles, Harry, and Jack began to push the iceboat before them, while Boxy and Andy followed on behind with the sled.

It was now dark, and growing colder every minute, which was odd, so they thought, since the wind had gone down.

"We won't get that snowstorm to-night, that's sure," remarked Harry. "It is always warmer just before a heavy fall of snow."

"Maybe we'll catch clear weather that's cold enough to freeze the leg off a mule," returned Jack. "Somebody said there was an intensely cold snap on the way."

"Oh, we're prepared for cold all right," put in Boxy. "All you've got to do is to move around lively like to keep up the circulation, and you are all right."

"Just the same I wish we were in Rudd's Landing," said Jack. "I don't like this traveling on an unknown part of the river in the dark. We may not find the Landing at all."

"Pooh! How can we help it? We know just where it is along shore."

"Well, then, let us turn in a bit. There is no sense in keeping away out here in the middle."

"That's so," said Andy. "It may be warmer in toward the shore."

So they turned in the direction of the shore upon which was situated the town for which they were bound. The

over-hanging bank of the stream was fringed with bushes and trees and they skirted along just outside of these, keeping a sharp lookout for air-holes and thin spots.

"Don't want a bath just now," shivered Boxy.

"No; a bath would just about do us up," returned Andy. "As it is, I can hardly move along."

"We'll be all right when we get to Barton Coils' place," called back Jack. "So don't get faint-hearted, Andy."

On they went, with no sound breaking the stillness of the cold night save the grinding of the iceboat runners and their skates on the ice.

Suddenly from out of the darkness among the trees which lined the farthest shore came a dismal howl that caused nearly every one to jump in alarm.

"My gracious! what was that?" exclaimed Andy.

"Dat mut be a ghost, suah!" cried Pickles, as he sprang away from the voice.

"It's the most unearthly sound I ever heard," put in Harry.

"And don't you know what it is?" asked Jack, with a merry laugh.

"No," said Boxy. "What is it?"

"Nothing more nor less than the bark of a fox. There it goes again."

"Goodness! I never knew a fox would get up such a dismal noise," exclaimed Boxy. "Why, it's enough to give one the creeps."

"Wait till you get into the woods on the other side of Rock Island Lake, and you'll hear sounds to make your hair stand on end, I'll warrant."

The barking continued for some time, and then came answering calls from several other locations.

"They are tuning up to descend on some hen roost, I imagine," said Jack. "It's a good way to get up their courage."

"I'd like to get a shot at one of them," said Harry.

"So would I," burst out Boxy. "Can't we get at them, Jack?"

"It would take too long, I'm afraid. Andy couldn't stand the waiting in the cold."

"Boxy and I might wait, and you fellows go on," suggested Harry. "We will soon catch up with you."

"Yes, let's do that," burst in Boxy.

The matter was talked over for a minute, and then it was agreed that Harry and Boxy should take the guns and remain behind a quarter of an hour, while the others pressed on for Rudd's Landing, keeping close to the river bank they were now skirting.

Seeing to it that the two guns were ready for use, the two would-be fox hunters set out across the river in the direction from which the first barks of the animals had proceeded. Meanwhile those on the *Icicle* and the sled went ahead, and were speedily lost to view around a broad bend beyond.

"It would be fine if we could get a fox apiece," said Boxy, as they skated along close to one another. "We could keep the brushes as trophies."

"I guess we'll be lucky if we get a good shot at one of them," returned his companion. "Foxes are very sly chaps."

"Oh, I know that."

"Let us go up the river a bit, so as to get out of that wind. They can smell your scent if the wind is blowing from you to them."

They moved up the river about twenty yards, and then made a semi-circle toward the shore. Here they found a small creek, and up this they moved as silently as possible.

"We must be getting close to one of the fellows," whispered Boxy. "That sound came from this vicinity."

"Hush, Boxy, he may——"

Harry did not finish, for at that instant a bark sounded so closely to them that both sprang back in alarm. A little open glade was before them, and directly in the center of it both boys discovered a silver gray fox, standing with one forefoot raised, listening for an answer to his call.

CHAPTER XI.

A LUCKY SHOT.

Boxy was about to say something, but Harry quickly placed his hand over his companion's mouth and motioned him to remain silent.

Then he raised his gun, and pointed to Boxy to do the same.

A brief interval of silence followed, and then, bang! went Boxy's gun, before he had had time to take anything like a correct aim.

The shot spread out over the fox's head, and caused him to leap to one side in alarm.

"Didn't I hit him?" cried Boxy.

Bang! went Harry's gun. His aim was better than Boxy's, and off limped the fox on three legs, the left hind one having received part of the charge of shot.

"You hit him, even if I didn't!" yelled Boxy. "But he'll get away from us, I'm afraid!"

"Hurry and load up!" cried Harry. "We can get him if we try."

They reloaded the guns with all possible speed, running after the fox as they did so. It was hard work with the skates on their feet, and just as they got the animal again in sight Boxy tripped and went down on his knees in a hollow.

His gun went off as he tumbled, and the shot grazed the fox's neck, causing a painful wound.

The animal let out a yelp of rage, and turned to leap down into the very hollow into which Boxy had tumbled.

"Shoot him, Harry!" cried the boy, in sudden terror. "He's coming after me!"

Boxy was partly right. As the fox reached the bottom of the opening he spied Boxy, and, feeling ugly, he did not attempt to get away, but sprang directly for Boxy's face.

It was a thrilling moment, for, though small, a fox is exceedingly savage when aroused, and with his long, sharp teeth can do serious damage.

Boxy squirmed to one side, and the animal landed on his shoulder. He buried his teeth into the boy's overcoat, snapping and snarling as he did so.

Then a loud report rang out, as Harry fired. He was not over three yards away, and his aim was true. The fox received the greater part of the shot in his side, and, with a backward leap he tumbled over dead.

It was several seconds before Boxy managed to scramble to his feet. He was as white as a ghost, and trembling in every limb.

"Is he—he dead?" he gasped, as he surveyed the fox from a slight distance.

"I guess he is, but there is nothing like making sure, he is such a sly creature," responded Harry, and, going up, he struck the head of the animal a resounding blow with the butt of his gun. "Yes, he's dead enough."

"It was lucky you hit him," went on Boxy, gratefully. "If you hadn't he would have chewed me up."

"He was a tough customer, and no mistake," rejoined Harry. "See what a splendid white tail!"

"He's a pretty big one. Will you take him along as he is?"

"I'll have to; I can't skin him here very well. Do you want to go after another?"

Boxy gave a shiver.

"Not to-night," he returned. "I've had enough hunting for the present. It's something a fellow has got to get used to."

"I doubt very much if we could get another," remarked Harry. "The shots have probably scattered them from the neighborhood. They know what a gun will do just as well as we."

Harry brought out a string from his pocket, and with this tied the dead fox to the barrel of his gun, which he slung over his shoulder.

"Our quarter of an hour is up and more," remarked Boxy, as they turned to go back to the river. "The others must be close to Rudd's Landing by this time."

"I guess you are not as cold as you were," laughed Harry. "I feel as warm as toast now."

"Yes, such an adventure is enough to stir up any one's blood," rejoined Boxy, dubiously. "But I'd just as lief remain a bit cold hereafter."

"You may expect greater adventures than this when we get to our winter camp, Boxy. Supposing that fox had been a bear, or even a big wolf?"

Boxy did not reply to this. Somehow, just then the camping out did not seem so much sport after all.

They were soon on the river, and, crossing to the other shore, started after their companions.

It was growing colder every moment, and the breeze on the ice, little as it was, went through them like a knife. They were glad enough when they saw numerous lights ahead, which they knew must be the town for which they were bound.

Presently they came upon a party of skaters, and from them learned that the *Icicle* had passed on but a few minutes before. They kept on, and just before Barton Coils' boathouse was reached, they overtook their companions.

"Got a fox, sure enough!" cried Andy. "Who shot it?"

"Harry, and he saved my life doing it," replied Boxy, and, hardly waiting to catch his breath, he told his story, to which those who had gone on ahead listened with keen interest.

By the time Boxy had finished, the boathouse, at which the *Icicle* was to be left, was reached, and, leaving the iceboat and the sled in a safe place, all hands rushed into the building to warm up around the red-hot stove, which to them looked to be just then the most inviting thing in the world.

Barton Coils, a jolly man of forty, received them cordially, and soon made them feel at home.

"I'll bet ye had a most uncommon cold run of it," he said. "And a cup of hot coffee will be just the thing to warm your inwards, eh?" and he straightway set about preparing, not only coffee, but a whole hot supper for them in his tiny kitchen in the rear.

By the time supper was ready, they were somewhat rested. They crowded around his small table like so many famished wolves, and it was astonishing to see how rapidly the food disappeared. Luckily, he had sufficient on hand, so no one went short.

Barton Coils took a lively interest in the proposed expedition, and declared he almost wished he was one of the party.

"It would make me feel ten years younger," he said.

"Why can't you go?" asked Jack. "I am sure we would all be pleased to have you along."

"I can't leave here, that's the trouble," returned the boathouse keeper. "Otherwise, I would accept your kind offer in a minute, I would, indeed."

He asked them about their traps, and told them of several additional things it would be best to take along. Andy made a note of the articles, and before retiring went up into the town and procured them.

"You'll find your *Icicle* all right when you come back for her, never fear," said Coils to Jack.

"I know we shall," said Jack. Then he began to talk to the others, and they all nodded in the affirmative. "See here, we have a proposition to make," he went on. "There is no use allowing the iceboat to remain idle during our absence, and we have decided to let you hire her out to the town folks if you will. Whatever you can get that way will be yours."

"Well, boys, I didn't expect this." And Barton Coils smiled his gratitude.

"It will be better to keep the runners scoured up than

let them grow rusty. But the sail will have to be mended."

"I'll fix that all right; and much obliged to you all," replied the boatkeeper.

There was a large spare room over the boathouse, and in this the boys spent the night, lying on the floor in their blankets in true camping style. Barton Coils would have given them a couple of old cots, but they declined these, for the reason, as Pickles put it, "dat da wanted fo' to git ust to sleepin' on de hard side of jess nowhere."

When the members of the Zero Club arose they found the day as clear as could be wished. The sun was just peeping over the distant hills and not a breath of air was blowing.

"Boom-a-rah! boom-a-rah! boom! boom! boom!" sounded out Boxy, imitating a big drum. "All up, for there is no time to lose if we want to reach the shores of Rock Island Lake before nightfall."

"Right you are," cried Jack. "Fold up the blankets and make your toilets just as quickly as you can. Pickles can see to the repacking of the sled, while I hunt around for breakfast."

"Breakfast is all ready!" put in Barton Coils, poking his head up the ladder-way. "I was just going to rouse you out."

In a jiffy one and another made their toilets, and climbed down into the kitchen. The smell of the buckwheat cakes filled the apartment, and a big platter of

them were ready to be eaten, along with some maple syrup fresh from the grove back of the landing.

"Here's where I am struck right in my soft spot!" cried Andy. "I'll miss the buckwheat cakes, if nothing else!"

"Then you had better fill up well," laughed Barton Coils. "Here you are, smoking hot! Who'll have the next?"

Forks and knives were clattering right merrily for the next ten minutes. The buckwheat cakes were washed down with hot coffee and cream, and soon all were more than satisfied.

Then came a farewell shake of the hand with the boat-house keeper, and a final inspection of their traps.

"Now we're off!" cried Jack. "Hurrah for the tour of the Zero Club!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!" cried the others, and Barton Coils joined in, waving his towel over his head as he did so.

Off they started, through the little town. The last house was soon left behind. Before them lay nothing but hills, woods and a frozen lake. Their outing in the ice and snow had truly begun.

CHAPTER XII.

JACK BECOMES LOST.

"Dis am de most glorious trip wot ever was, by golly!" cried Pickles, as he shoved on ahead of the rest, dragging the sled behind him. "Dis coon is werry glad he is alibe jess about now, boys!"

And in the exuberance of his spirits, Pickles broke out into an old darky refrain about the history and death of a wonderful "Blue-tail Fly," the chorus to which was so catchy that they were soon every one of them singing it.

"I'm glad he came along," whispered Jack to Harry. "He'll make days we can't go out seem shorter."

"So am I, Jack, Pickles is just the fellow for this crowd."

The boys had received close directions concerning the best route to pursue to reach the lake, and they were careful that no mistake should be made. They followed a road almost half through what was called Jackson's Run, and then struck off across a number of open fields to where a tiny stream ran at the foot of a long hill.

"That creek empties into Rock Island Lake," said Boxy. "I know, for I was up here once in the summer, and my uncle told me so."

"Then why can't we follow the stream until we reach the lake," suggested Andy.

"We could do that if it wasn't that the stream winds around so much," put in Jack. "In a direct line the lake is not over twelve miles from here, but like as not that stream would take us thirty or forty miles."

"Not quite as far as that, but still a pretty good way," said Harry. "I know these creeks around here twist and turn in all directions."

"We'll stick by the original intention, and be guided by the sun," said Boxy. "Come on, Harry, I'll race you to the top of the next hill!" and off he sped, with Harry at his heels.

When the top of the hill was reached both boys were well-nigh exhausted, and ready enough to sit down on a fallen tree and wait for the others to come up.

"You shouldn't do that," remonstrated Jack. "You'll tire yourselves out before you have covered half the day's journey."

"And you'll get sweated and take cold," put in Andy.

"If you feel so frisky, help Pickles with the sled," went on Jack.

"We will," cried both Harry and Boxy, and they at once relieved Pickles, much to his satisfaction, for the pull up the hill had been by no means an easy one.

And so, "cutting up like wild Indians," as Jack expressed it, they continued on their tramp, up one hill and down another, crossing half a dozen tiny streams, and making their way through dense woods and thick patches of brush and heaps of rocks. Occasionally they roused up a squirrel or a rabbit, and once the loud drumming told them that partridges were not far off.

Just before the noon hour Jack took his gun, and kept his eyes open for rabbits. It was not long before he shot two, and when they came to a halt for dinner these were quickly skinned and broiled over the fire Pickles kindled.

"We want to be as saving as possible with our stores," observed Harry, as he sat, sucking the meat from a rabbit leg. "We may get snowed in so that we can't get out to shoot a thing."

"The first thing to do will be to lay in a supply of rabbits and squirrels," returned Jack. "Then, if we get nothing better, we won't starve, no matter what happens."

"That's a good idea!" cried Andy. "Rabbit meat is better than nothing, even if you have it three times a day."

The meal finished, the things were quickly put away once more, and again the onward march was resumed.

The character of the country now changed somewhat. The hills became higher and harder to climb, and the undergrowth more rugged. More than once they had to turn back and seek another path because they could not get through without carrying the sled and its load. Once they came to a deep ravine, all of ten feet wide, with no crossing place in sight.

"Stumped!" cried Boxy. "Now what's to be done?"

"Let's walk along this side for a few hundred feet," suggested Harry. "It may grow narrower further up."

"I'll stay here with the sled until you find out," replied Jack, who had just taken hold. "It's no use to pull

it along, and then have to drag it back. If you find a place, yell out, and I'll come."

Harry and Boxy went on, accompanied by Pickles. It was no easy work to follow the edge of the ravine, for in several places the ice and snow were treacherous, and ready to let them slide down should they venture too close.

At last they reached a spot where the opening was scarcely five feet wide.

"We ought to be able to cross here," said Boxy.

"Dat am so," put in Pickles. "Why, I kin jump it, suah! See here!"

And he made a wild leap over, and disappeared into a hollow filled with snow on the other side.

"He's gone!" shouted Boxy.

"He's all right," returned Harry, as he saw Pickles' woolly head slowly emerging from the drift.

"By golly, I didn't fink dat was so slopy heah!" sputtered the colored youth, as he stood up in snow to his waist. "If I hadn't jumped so fah I'se dun reckon I would hab gone an' rolled down to de bottom ob de crack suah!"

"That settles it; we can't cross here," said Harry. "Let us go on a bit further."

They continued along the edge of the ravine, Pickles keeping up with them on the other side. Fifty feet further on the cut closed up almost entirely, and they easily stepped across.

"This beats running any risk jumping," said Harry, and Pickles readily agreed with him.

All three of the boys set up a shout for the others, and it was not long before Jack and Andy appeared with the sled. The latter was lifted over the narrow opening, and then the club continued on its way, Pickles again bursting out into a song, this time singing about "Forms in White, a-Floating in de Sky."

"Just now it was a case of a form in black a-floundering in the snow," remarked Boxy to Harry, and the latter laughed heartily over the joke.

"We ought to be getting near to the lake now," said Jack, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

"That's so," said Andy. "If we get there much later than this there will be no time left to build a shelter for the night."

On and on they went, taking turns at dragging the sled with its heavy load. The sun was pretty well down, and it began to grow colder.

"The lake, at last!" suddenly burst from Boxy's lips, and he ran ahead, quickly followed by the others.

Boxy was right. A short dash through a clump of trees, and they stood on the shore of Rock Island Lake. Before them was a broad expanse of glass-like ice, dotted here and there with long drifts of snow.

"Hurrah!" they all shouted, and Pickles added: "An' dis ends de day's trabbels ob de Zero Club."

"Now for a good spot to pitch camp," cried Jack. "I can't say that I like it right here."

"No; it's too cold," returned Harry. "Let's go back

a little, say a hundred feet or so, and find some sort of shelter behind some rocks."

This was readily agreed upon, and the boys scattered in various directions, each trying to find a more suitable spot than the others.

Harry struck out up the lake shore a bit, and presently came to a spot where two immense rocks leaned against each other over a little gully, scarcely a yard deep and two yards wide. The gully was dry, and filled with leaves, and he thought that if the snow was cleared out and banked up in front, it would be just the place they desired. The opening under the rocks was about ten feet deep, and the rear was choked up with fallen branches, brush, and dirt.

He called to the others, and soon all but Jack were by his side.

"That's the ticket!" cried Boxy. "We couldn't find a better place made to order."

"We can spread the rubber blankets over the leaves, and it will make good bedding," said Andy.

"An' dat dar snow will keep out all de cold," put in Pickles. "Yes, de prize goes to Harry fo' findin' de right spot."

"Where is Jack?" asked Harry, anxious to have all of the members of the club satisfied before it was settled to stay. "Maybe he has discovered a better spot."

They all set up a shout, and waited for an answer. But none came. Then they shouted again, with the same result.

"That's queer!" murmured Andy, somewhat dis-

turbed. "Give him another call, boys, as loud as you can."

They did so willingly, and Boxy added his imitation locomotive whistle as well.

It brought forth no reply. Jack was lost to them. What could have become of him?

CHAPTER XIII.

JACK'S EXPERIENCE.

When Jack left the other members of the Zero Club to look for a suitable camping-place for the night, he had no intention of walking any great distance away.

He struck down the lake shore, in a direction directly opposite to that taken by Harry, and at almost right angles to that pursued by the others.

Jack walked probably fifty yards before coming to anything but a flat surface of snow and ice, with here and there a tree or a bush.

"This is no good," he murmured to himself. "I've a good mind to go back and try in the other direction."

Had he done so, he might have saved himself all the trouble that followed, and likewise saved the others from a deal of anxiety concerning his welfare.

But Jack remembered that Harry had gone off in the opposite direction, and so he kept on until he reached a small rise of ground, beyond which was a dense thicket of great trees, some all of a hundred feet in height.

"There ought to be a first-rate place among those trees," he thought. "I'll investigate a bit and see."

Jack walked in among the trees and soon located a spot between several tall maples that he thought would be just the thing. Five trees were in a semi-circle, and

he calculated that by heaping the brush around them a temporary shelter that would be both safe and warm would be secured.

He walked around the trees, and then to a spot a few yards away, where brush grew thickly.

Here both the snow and the leaves were thick, and without warning he suddenly found himself sinking down in the midst of both.

He tried to scramble to a place of safety, but it was too late and down he went into an opening that was all of ten feet deep. The leaves and snow tumbled with him, and he was all but smothered.

When at last he managed to get his head clear of what was around him, he found himself up to his armpits in the mass, and almost powerless to move the lower portion of his body.

Jack was not one to cry for help, so, for a while, he remained silent, doing his best to extricate himself from his difficulty.

It was very cold down at the bottom of the hole, and, despite his exertions, he found himself gradually getting chilled to the bone. It was also dark, and this made his situation worse than had it been daylight.

At last, in desperation, he wrenched himself away from the snow and rubbish, and freed himself as far as the waist. But higher than this he could not get, for every time he attempted it he only slipped back again.

A half-hour was passed in trying to extricate himself, and by that time he was so worn out he was unable to make further effort.

"This is the worst fix yet," he muttered, to himself. "If I stay here I'll be frozen to death before morning," and he gave a shiver which was not altogether from cold.

It was then that he began to shout for help. His voice was weak, and it is doubtful if it could have been heard thirty feet from his prison.

A quarter of an hour more went by, and Jack was almost stiff. His feet were like two cakes of ice, and his ears pained him fearfully.

"Where can the others be? Why don't they come and help me out?"

He asked himself these questions over and over again. But no answer was vouschafed. It was as if the other members of the Zero Club had forgotten his existence.

Presently Jack heard a rustle in the bushes in front of him. Was it one of the other boys on the hunt?

Then a low growl made him start and strain his eyes in the direction. What was it, a fox, wolf or bear? He looked up at the entrance to the hole, but no animal showed itself.

Again he yelled, this time not only to summon assistance, but also to scare away the beast, whatever it was. A crashing in the brush followed, and then dead silence.

"He's gone away," he muttered, with a sigh of relief. "But who knows but what he'll come back, or some other animal will meander this way. Oh, if I was only out of this hole I'd take precious good care that I didn't get into another."

Ten minutes more—an age to poor Jack—and another rustle in the brush was heard. Then followed a shout:

"Hullo, Jack! Where are you?"

It was Harry's voice, and it thrilled him with joy.

"Here I am, in a hole," he replied.

But, alas! his voice was so faint that Harry did not hear it, and passed to his left and continued the search in that direction.

"Help! help!" cried Jack, frantically. "This way! In a hole! Help!"

Harry did not hear, but Andy, who was also close at hand, did, and shouted to the others:

"He's here, fellows! Come this way!"

"Where?" asked Boxy and Pickles, in a breath, while Harry quickly retraced his steps.

"Somewhere around here. Listen."

Again Jack called out, and now they were able to locate him. Andy was in advance, and his companions were amazed to see him disappear as suddenly as if he had taken a plunge in the water.

"There's a hole there. Be careful!" shouted Harry.

"Dat mus' be a b'ar hole!" put in Pickles. "Pooh Andy's dun gone in it, too!"

"Help us out!" yelled Andy, from beside Jack. "This is a sort of a cave-in, and Jack is half buried under the dirt and snow."

"We'll have to get the rope and haul them out," remarked Boxy. "Run back for it, Pickles."

The colored boy skipped off at top speed. While he was gone, Boxy and Harry skirted the opening with great care, and found the most available standing place.

When Pickles returned, he brought with him the sled

rope, and also the one used for tying on the load. These were twisted together, and, not without some difficulty, Andy was raised up.

Then came the work of raising Jack. This was no easy task, for the poor fellow was almost too exhausted to even catch hold of the rope.

"We'll make a loop, and he can slip it under his asms," suggested his younger brother, and this was done, and presently Jack stood beside the others, supported by Boxy and Pickles.

"Take me to some place where I can get warm!" he gasped.

"We'll run you back to the place where the sled is and cover you up with blankets," replied Boxy. "Come on, it's the best thing for you."

And off he and Pickles started, with the half-frozen boy between them.

Harry and Andy ran ahead and worked like lightning to gather dry brush and start a fire in the shelter of several trees. It was not long before they had a big blaze, and Jack was seated on the sled in front of this with several blankets thrown over his back..

"I'll be all right in a little while now," he said. "So you fellows had better turn your attention to locating a camp for to-night."

"Harry has found a place," said Boxy. "It's just the thing, between a couple of big rocks."

While Andy remained behind to keep up the fire and prepare supper, Harry, Boxy and the colored youth went off to prepare the camp.

"We'll take all the snow out first," said Harry. "Then we'll make a wall in front, with only a narrow opening to get in, and shut up the back as tightly as we can."

The three boys went to work with a will, and inside of half an hour the temporary camp was ready for occupancy. The sled was drawn inside, and the rubber blankets spread around, and then the fire was transferred to a spot directly in front of the opening.

"That will keep us warm, and also keep wild animals from bothering us," said Harry.

"Yes; we want no wolf or bear to wake us up by biting off an ear or a foot," laughed Boxy.

"Gee, shoo, no!" put in Pickles. "Dat would make dis yere coon turn white, 'deed it would!"

Just before they had reached the lake, Boxy, anxious to prove that he wasn't such a poor shot that he couldn't shoot anything, had gone off in search of a partridge, and succeeded in bringing down one of fair size. This Andy had prepared as nicely as possible, and, with bread and tea, made a most appetizing supper for the hungry boys.

"This is the last of the fresh bread," remarked Andy, as he dealt it out. "After this we'll have crackers instead."

"Just as good," returned Boxy, but before the tour was over he was compelled to change his mind.

The supper over, the boys found it growing late. They gathered some wood and heaped it upon the fire

in such a way that it might burn the greater part of the night, and then sought to retire.

"We want to be up early in the morning," remarked Jack, who now felt quite recovered. "It looks a little like snow, and we want to strike a permanent camp before it lets down too heavily."

"Well, I'm ready to go to sleep," returned Boxy. "And I won't even ask Pickles to sing a lullaby for me."

One after another the boys crawled into the cave-like sleeping place, and selected their various corners. Andy brought in a pine knot, all ablaze from the fire, and held it aloft so that they might see if all was right.

A second later Pickles gave a yell, which was followed by a cry of fright from every one of the others. Then a hasty scramble was made for the outside, the boys fairly tumbling over each other in their efforts to escape.

And small wonder, for the interior of the cave-hut was alive with snakes!

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIGHT WITH REPTILES.

"Snakes!" yelled Pickles. "Fo' de land sakes, let dis chile git out!"

"Snakes!" echoed each of the others. "We can't stay in here!"

And in less than half a minute every one was outside and several yards away from the entrance to the temporary camp.

"Whoever dreamed of the reptiles being there!" burst out Boxy.

"We might have known it," put in Harry. "Snakes always live around rocks."

"But why didn't we see them first?" questioned Andy.

"They were out of sight and half frozen," responded Jack. "I suppose our moving around and the heat from the campfire roused them up."

"Wot we gwine to do?" asked Pickles, dolefully. "I wouldn't go back dar fo' a billion dollars in cash, by golly, I wouldn't!"

"The blankets and the sled are in there," put in Andy. "We must get them."

"Yes, we can't even locate another camp until we have them," said Harry. "We'd freeze to death without covers."

"I move we fight the snakes and kill them," remarked Jack. "I don't believe they are very harmful."

"They may be rattlers!" said Boxy, with a shiver. "And I don't want to 'climb the golden stair' just yet."

"I doubt if they are rattlers," returned Jack. "And even so, they are not yet warm enough to show much fight. The likelihood is that we can kill them off without much trouble."

The boys talked the matter over, and at length decided to make an attack on the snakes, and thus at least gain possession of their traps. Then if the cave-hut still looked "snaky" they would hunt up a new spot in which to spend the night.

Each of the boys provided himself with a torch and a club, and then the opening to the place was enlarged to twice its size.

Jack was the first to enter, and the others came closely behind him.

The leader quickly killed the first snake to raise its head, and Harry followed with the death of the largest of all of the reptiles. Then torches were stuck up in convenient places and the battle began.

At first the snakes were easy victims, but soon the noise and the deaths of their fellows roused up those that remained, and a loud hissing and a lively squirming told that they were angry.

They darted to one side and another, and more than one attempted to strike the boys with its fangs.

Harry had the most startling experience of all. A snake dropped from a crevice overhead and landed directly

on his neck. The sensation shocked the boy, but he was quick to act. He caught the snake by the tail, swung it around, and dashed its head with all his force against the solid walls of the hut-cave. The reptile was instantly killed.

Andy also had a thrilling experience, a snake winding itself around his ankle, and refusing to loosen itself even when caught back of the neck by the courageous boy.

"Hop out and hold him over the fire a second," cried Jack.

Out on one foot went Andy, still holding tight to the reptile. When close to the fire, he let go, and thrust the foot over the flames. On the instant the snake straightened out and fell into the fire, before either the boy's boot or his trousers were very much injured.

At last the snakes were all either killed or driven off, and the boys took a breathing spell. They counted up the slain, and with the one consumed by fire, found they numbered fourteen.

"That's a pretty good many in one dose," remarked Jack; "especially when some of them are pretty nearly three feet long."

"I never want to run across such a nest again!" shuddered Harry; and all agreed with him.

"There were at least half a dozen that got away," remarked Boxy. "I saw three crawl in between the rocks."

"So did I," returned Andy. "We don't want to put in any night in this place."

"By golly, no!" cried Pickles. "I dun radder tie my-

self up on de limb ob a tree and risk gittin' freezed to deaf!"

The sled and the blankets were hauled out of the hut-cave, and examined to see that no live snake was anywhere in hiding among them. Then they gathered around the fire to talk matters over.

Jack mentioned the spot he had found among the tall maple trees just before he had fallen into the hole, and they decided that they would locate there for the night. Once more the traps, and a large portion of the burning brush, were removed, and they set to work with all speed to furnish themselves a resting-place.

"Now, if this doesn't turn out all right, we'll bunk around the fire in the open," said Jack, and the others said so, too.

The extra blankets were tied up around the trees, and against these were heaped brush and leaves. Then the interior was cleaned up, and the rubber blankets put down once more.

The work took less than half an hour, and when it was completed the boys had a camp that if not quite as warm as the other might have been, was still dry and sheltered.

"We'll build an extra large fire, and that will keep us warm," said Andy.

"Yes, but we don't want to wake up an' find ourselves burnt to deaf," cautioned Pickles.

"That's so," put in Jack. "Be careful that the leaves are cleaned away around the brush before you build the fire too high."

Once again brush was gathered, and the fire fixed to

everybody's satisfaction, and then all hands retired into the new camping hut, and sought their various places of rest.

It was a strange experience to all of them, and it is doubtful if any of them slept, saving by fits and starts, until toward morning. The fight with the snakes was still in their minds, and, as Boxy aptly put it, "they could see snakes just as plainly as if they had been off on a spree."

Pickles was the first to stir himself in the morning, while it was yet dark. The colored boy sat up, and, seeing his companions still slumbering, decided to go out, start up the fire and begin preparing breakfast without disturbing them.

He arose to his feet, and, throwing down his blanket, stepped over to the entrance to the hut. Then a low cry of surprise escaped him, a cry that made all of the others open their eyes.

"What's the matter?" cried Harry.

"It's dun gone an' snowed de fiah cl'ar out ob sight!" returned Pickles.

"Snowed the fire out of sight is good," laughed Boxy. "Well, let's hustle and shovel it in sight again, for it's as cold as the North Pole in here!"

"And it's colder yet outside," replied Jack, looking out of the doorway Pickles had opened. "The snow is coming down lively, boys, and we must lose no time if we want to get across the lake and settle down."

Every one was soon outside, Boxy and Andy with their blankets still drawn around them. Both were used

to sleeping in heated bedrooms, and the cold seemed to pierce them to the very marrow of their bones.

"Hustle around to start up the fire, and that will warm you up," suggested Harry. "Come, everybody pitch in, for it's half-past seven, and we want to be on our way by eight o'clock, or a little after."

They did pitch in with a will. While Pickles, Boxy, and Andy started up a big, lively blaze, and got together something to eat, Jack and Harry took down the blankets and packed the things on the sled.

Presently Pickles slipped off down to the lake, taking the ax and a spear with him.

"He's gone to spear a pickerel or some other fish," said Boxy, and he was right, for it was not long before the colored boy returned with a beauty, weighing all of a pound and a half, which was soon broiling over the flames.

It was still snowing, and the boys had to fairly brush the flakes from what they were eating during the meal. Jack calculated that already three inches had fallen on the level.

"And before night we'll have a foot or two of it unless it clears off," he added. "So be lively, fellows!"

"Can we skate over the lake?" questioned Andy. "That would be much easier than walking."

"Yo' can skate ober all right," replied Pickles. "De wind has dun kept mos' ob it cl'ar, 'ceptin' in spots."

"Oh, but this is fine fish!" cried Boxy. "Pickles, you mustn't forget that you promised to show me how to spear them."

"So I will, when we gits ober to de reg'lar camp," replied the colored youth, smiling broadly at the praise bestowed.

By quarter past eight they put out the fire, placed the last of the things on the sled, and set out. Down on the surface of the lake they found a cold wind blowing from the northwest, and the snowflakes appeared to be thicker than ever.

CHAPTER XV.

LOST IN THE SNOW.

As they had done the day previous, they took turns in drawing the sled, which, fortunately, rode over the surface of the ice easily.

Pickles was the first to try a hand. Jack and Harry went on ahead, while Andy and Boxy came close behind the traps.

All of the boys had their collars turned high up and their caps pulled well down. Yet the snow crept in, and more than once they could scarcely see ahead of them.

"It's not going to be such a bang-up, pleasant trip across, to my way of thinking," remarked Jack. "The snow is coming down heavier every minute."

"Well, we'll make a beeline for the opposite shore," returned Harry. "If we keep on pushing like this, we ought to make it by a little after noon, and that will give us plenty of time to select a spot for a permanent camp before night comes."

"That's true."

"There is one thing we must guard against, and that is airholes. This drifting snow is apt to cover them so a fellow can't see them until it is too late."

"We'll keep our eyes peeled," returned Jack, and he called out instructions for those behind to do the same.

On and on they went, keeping the straightest line they could without anything to aid their eyesight. It was still colder as they got farther from the shore, and occasionally a blast of wind would nearly take them from their feet.

"There is one thing we forgot to bring along, and that's a compass," said Harry. "It's a pity, too! If we had it the way need not bother us in the least."

"I thought of it yesterday, after we had left Rudd's Landing. But I hated to go back after one."

Once or twice a flock of wild birds would circle over their heads in the snow, and they would take a shot at them. In this manner they brought down ten of the creatures, which, though small, would make dainty eating. Jack and Harry placed them in their bags, and continued to keep their eyes open for more.

About ten o'clock the wind began to blow stronger than ever. It was little short of a hurricane, and took the boys fairly off their feet.

"By golly! dis ain't no picnic, am it?" cried Pickles, as he went sailing up the lake, unable to stop himself.

"Lower your sails, Pickles!" cried Boxy, who looked at the difficulty in the light of a joke. He had to dig his heels deep into the ice to keep himself from following the colored youth.

Jack was drawing the sled. A dozen times it swung around, and just as he thought he had it right, the wind got under it, and over it went in a trice, spilling off several things that had not been packed on well.

With much trouble the sled was righted. Pickles

fought his way back, and helped tie the traps fast, this time making sure that not a single thing was left loose.

"It won't do to lose even a plate," said Andy. "For there are just enough for the crowd and no more."

"If this keeps on, we'll have a blizzard!" gasped Harry. "It fairly takes one's breath away!"

"Have to keep your mouth shut or you'll swallow a lot of snow, too!" put in Boxy. "By the looks of things around us, one would imagine we were out on the plains of Montana!"

"The best thing we can do is to stop talking and fight our way to the shore," remarked Jack, seriously. "The first thing you know, we'll be turned around, and we won't know in what direction the shore is."

Once again they moved forward. The snow beat on the right sides of their faces and filled their right ears, and, unconsciously, they turned a little away, and thus took a course which led them partly up the lake instead of directly across.

By twelve o'clock they were nowhere near the woods they knew was beyond the edge of the lake. All around them were ice and snow. The wind had let up a bit, but the snow was whirling down thicker than ever.

"I'm getting played out," said Andy.

"And I'm hungry," added Boxy.

"And I'm a bit of both," put in Harry. "Let us rest a few minutes and have a bite to eat."

Pickles was more than willing, and at once went to work to get out crackers and cheese. Jack looked on with a doubtful face.

"We'll have a bite, but don't waste time resting," he said. "We must go on, or night will overtake us while we are still on the lake."

"Why, it's only twelve o'clock!" cried Andy.

"That's so, but the shore is still a good way off, and if we get lost——"

"Oh, we won't get lost," put in Boxy. "We all know just where the shore is."

"And where is it?" questioned Jack, still more seriously.

"Right over there," and Boxy pointed with his arm.

"Why, no, it's over in that direction," cried Andy, pointing nearly at right angles with Boxy.

"You are both wrong," put in Harry. "It's over here," and his arm went up in still a third direction.

"Boxy am right," said Pickles.

"I am inclined to think Harry is right," remarked Jack.

"But didn't we come that way?" insisted Boxy, in surprise.

"Yes, we came from that way, but we have been turning our backs to the wind, and going up the lake instead of across."

"Maybe the wind has shifted."

"I doubt it," said Harry.

"I don't believe the wind has shifted much," said Andy. "But I was sure the shore lay off in that direction. Jack is right, we had better be moving off without delay. We don't want to get lost in this snowstorm out here on the lake."

They all agreed to this, but in what direction should they turn?

It was finally decided to try the course Harry and Jack advocated, as they were looked on as natural leaders of the party.

The remainder of the crackers and cheese brought out by Pickles was quickly eaten, and they set off.

It was growing cooler again, and the wind blew the snow in blinding masses into their faces, Onward they skated, until the drifts became almost impassable.

"I can't skate through this!" cried Andy, at last.

"Let us take our skates off and walk," suggested Boxy.

But Harry and Jack quickly vetoed this. It was just as easy to plow through the snow on skates, and it was easier to skate over the clear patches of ice than walk.

So they kept on their skates, and thereafter Jack helped his younger brother whenever Andy seemed in danger of pegging out.

"My ears are all but frozen," said Boxy, at last. "My right one has no feeling in it any longer."

"Rub snow on it," suggested Harry. "And rub it on hard, too," and he showed his companion how to do it.

"Dis am de werry worst trip I eber tuk," declared Pickles, solemnly. "An' I won't take anudder in a long, long while."

"If we could only see away ahead," said Jack; "but the snow hides everything fifty feet off."

"And the storm is growing wilder every second," added Andy.

"This will knock out hunting for a day or two, even if

we strike a camp," declared Boxy, breathing heavily, to keep up with the others.

"Oh, it will be all right if it stops snowing and the sun comes out," returned Jack, as cheerfully as he could.

"By golly! it looks like it would snow fo' a week!" cried Pickles. "Jess look how thick it am comin' down now! Jess like somebody was a-shakin' out a fedder-bed ober our heads!"

Pickles was right. The snow was now coming down so thickly that it seemed to fill every inch of the air. Their vision in every direction was cut off to but a few feet in front of them.

"Stick close together," urged Harry. "If we become separated we'll never find each other again."

His timely advice was heeded and they bunched up so closely that they frequently took hold of each other's arms.

It was hard work to drag the sled now, and two had to take hold instead of only one.

Finally they came to a long, solid drift of snow, all of six feet high, and two or three yards wide. Jack and Harry mounted to the top, and, despite the swirling snow and cutting wind, essayed to pierce the gathering darkness around them.

It was useless. Nothing but snow and ice was to be seen. Night was coming on, and they were lost in the pelting storm!

CHAPTER XVI.

SETTLING DOWN IN CAMP.

It certainly was a dismal outlook, lost on the lake in a howling snowstorm, and night coming on. Small wonder that all of the members of the Zero Club were filled with fear as to the outcome of the unexpected situation.

The wind blew sharper than ever, cutting like a knife, and causing their teeth to chatter in spite of themselves. The snowflakes settled on their faces and had to be brushed off their eyebrows that they might see.

"Here's a state of things, and no error," remarked Boxy, as he joined Harry and Jack in front of the big snowdrift. "Have we got to go through this?"

"We've got to do something," returned Jack, with a certain sort of desperateness in his voice. "If we stay out here much longer we'll be frozen to death and buried in the snow!"

"We must push on ahead—it's our only salvation," added Harry. "If we keep on in a straight line we are bound to fetch up somewhere sooner or later."

"We may walk clean up to the upper end of the lake," said Andy, in a low voice. He was too exhausted to speak louder.

"Well, that would be better than remaining here," replied his big brother. "Come, fellows, brace up and put

your best leg forward," he went on, in an effort to cheer up their lagging spirits.

Pulling and pushing the sled as best they could, they attacked the huge drift before them. In a couple of minutes they were on the other side. All had had tumbles, but to these they paid no attention.

"By golly! but I would give all I kin rake an' scrape togedder to be in a warm kitchen jess about now!" puffed Pickles. "My two feet dun got froze as stiff as two chunks ob ice!"

"We're all in the same boat," replied Boxy. "I can scarcely drag one foot after the other."

"And I feel like sitting down and going to sleep," put in Andy. "Let us rest."

"No! no!" rejoined his elder brother, quickly. "If you rested and went off into a doze you would never wake up again. We must keep on by all means!"

And on they pressed, slowly and painfully, growing more weary at every step. The snow and wind continued, and it grew steadily darker. Would that awful trip across the lake never come to an end?

At last, when they were about ready to give up in despair, Harry, in advance of all the rest, gave a joyous little shout.

"The shore, boys!"

"Where? where?" they cried out in chorus, and clustered around him.

"Just off to our right. We have been walking along within fifty feet of it."

"Gracious, you don't mean it!" exclaimed Boxy.

"True enough, boys; come on to land and get a fire started!"

Boxy set off as fast as he could on skates through the snow. The others followed, Jack and Pickles dragging the sled.

They were soon off the lake and huddled in a group behind a number of trees and bushes, which afforded a fair shelter from the wind and snow. Here they paused to catch their breaths and gaze around them.

"I imagine we are at least a mile above the spot we struck out for," observed Jack. "But that doesn't matter, so long as we have crossed the lake in safety. What shall we do, light a fire or hunt a place to camp for the night first?"

"Let's light a fire and get warmed up," answered Andy. "I am sure none of us can do much in our present condition."

His idea was warmly seconded by the others, and soon a heap of brush was collected in a convenient spot and set on fire. They drew up to it as close as they dared, and warmed their chilled bodies. The sled load was again attacked, and crackers and cut-up smoked beef passed around. It was wonderful what appetites all hands had whenever the least sign of a meal appeared. It seemed they could eat all the time.

Down in their hearts all were deeply grateful that the perils of a possible night on the lake were passed. They were certain that, had they been compelled to remain in that wind and snow, some of them would have perished.

Jack and Harry were the first to declare themselves warm and comfortable once more, and, allowing the others to remain seated around the fire, they started off to locate some suitable spot where they might settle down for the balance of the outing.

"We don't want any more snakes' nests," remarked Harry, with a laugh. "One is a-plenty."

"Right you are," replied Jack. "What do you say if we find a circle of trees and build a sort of hut? We can cut down a number of small trees with the ax and fill up the openings by twining in brush and then heaping up snow on the outside."

"Boxy was speaking of that sort of place. We will see what we can find."

They passed along the shore of the lake until they came to a small creek. They walked up the bank of this for a distance of a hundred feet, and suddenly Harry came to a halt.

"How is that spot over to the other side?" he cried.

"Just the cheese!" responded Jack.

The place to which Harry had called attention was one where four trees stood in almost a square. Between the two trees farthest back and those to one side there was a mass of thick brush, while between the two trees on the other side were several large rocks, which had rolled down from a hill beyond.

"We can build a hut there without difficulty," said Harry.

"That's so. First we can clear out the square and pile it up on the rocks to the right Then we can cut a few

slender trees and brace up that brush in the rear and on the left. But how about a roof?"

"We can cris-cross half-a-dozen poles in the lowest branches of the four corner trees and pile brush and leaves on top. That ought to make a good enough roof for the time we want to stay. The brush can be twisted pretty tight, you know."

They looked the spot over carefully for snakes, and, finding none, returned to the fire.

"That ought to do first-rate," said Boxy, when he had heard their report. "But we can never build that hut to-night."

"We can fix it up enough to sleep in," returned Jack. "Come on. We will start another fire on the bank of the creek."

"It's good it's on the creek," said Andy. "If a thaw comes up the water will have a chance to flow away."

"I dun racken we won't hab no thaw jess yet!" put in Pickles. "It's gwine to keep on a-snowin' fo' a month or moah!"

Everybody laughed at this, and they pulled the sled off to the spot beside the creek. Here a second fire was built, and Pickles vowed that he was going to do all in his power to keep it going until they left for home.

"To-morrow I'll git some big knots ob wood an' a log or two, an' da'll burn a week," he said.

It was now six o'clock in the evening, and they set to work with a will to clear out the space between the four trees selected to become the corners of the hut. The brush taken out was piled against the other bushes be-

tween the trees, and more cut from a distance away was also added.

This work was performed by Andy, Boxy and Pickles. In the meantime Jack and Harry cut twenty-odd saplings, and trimmed them as much as necessary.

The young trees were then taken to the cleared square, and four of them were put up to rest from corner to corner, about ten feet from the ground. When they were secure, ten of the poles were placed across the opening. Then brush was handed up and piled on, and a pole or two was fastened over the top to keep it from blowing away.

"Now we've got a good enough roof for anybody," said Jack, when the job was finished. "It's not very fine-looking, but it will keep out the snow and a good bit of the cold, and that's what we want."

Two of the remaining saplings were placed at right angles to make a small doorway alongside of one of the trees, and the others were taken inside to brace up the several walls of brush and stone.

By the time all this was accomplished, it was after eight o'clock, and every one of the boys was completely fagged out.

"Fix up the fire for the night and we'll go to bed," said Harry. "We have more than earned a night's rest."

"You're right," added Boxy. "And don't any one dare to wake me until eight or nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"We haven't named the camp yet," said Andy. "Let's do that before we retire."

"It's Camp Rest as much as anything," replied his brother, and then and there the spot was so christened.

Pickles lost no time in replenishing the fire. Then the sled, with all of the other traps, was dragged into the hut and a heavy blanket was fastened up over the doorway.

It took the boys some little time to arrange themselves to their satisfaction, but, being so tired, they were not as particular as they otherwise might have been.

Harry took a place nearest the doorway, with Jack close behind him. Pickles lay over in a corner by himself, and Boxy and Andy chummed up close in another corner.

Soon every one was asleep, and not a sound save the heavy breathing of the boys, the singing of the wind through the tree branches and the crackling of the fire broke the stillness of the night. The thick snow still came down, but so softly it was not heard.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUNTING FOR FOOD.

It was Jack who was the first awake on the following morning. He lay for some time without moving, and then unrolled himself from his blanket and sprang up, just as Harry opened his eyes with a start.

"Hullo, Jack! up already?"

"I just got up, Harry. I guess it's rather late." Jack looked at his watch. "Great guns! quarter to nine! Rouse up, boys, day has broke, and more!" he cried.

Soon every one in the hut was awake, and one after another they arose. Several had a light sprinkling of snow on their blankets, but the little that had sifted in had done no harm.

"We'll fix that to-day so not a spoonful shall come in hereafter," said Jack.

Pickles was the first to attempt to step outside. He uttered an exclamation of comical dismay.

"By golly! de snow's dun covered up de fiah most!" he cried.

The colored youth was right. All about the fire, and also the hut, the soft covering of white lay to the depth of a foot and a half, and the cleared spot where the flickering embers lay had been narrowed down to a tiny circle.

"We'll clear the snow away between the hut and the

fire first," said Harry. "Pickles, you can start to get breakfast."

"Dat's so, but what is we gwine to hab dis mornin'?" questioned the colored youth, soberly.

"We must hunt up our breakfast," said Boxy.

"Let's try to get a squirrel or two," suggested Andy. "I saw a hole on one of the trees yesterday, close to where we built the first fire."

"All right; you and Boxy take the guns and see what you can scare up," replied his brother. "Harry and I will go for rabbits, birds or whatever we can find."

Leaving Pickles to heap more brush and wood on the fire and set the water to boiling for coffee, the four boys split into two parties and set off.

"We won't be able to do much in this deep snow," observed Harry to Jack, as the two pushed up the stream. "There won't be much stirring."

"We might run across a hungry fox," returned his companion. "They come out if they are hungry enough."

"Are they good to eat?"

"Some say they are. I have never tried them, but I would eat fox meat in preference to starving, every time."

"Oh, so would I. But we are not starving yet."

"No, but there is no telling what may happen. It is true it has stopped snowing, but there is no telling how soon it may start up again."

"Well, I move we lay in as much as we can to-day," said Harry, after a pause. "We'll feel safer if we have something in the larder to fall back on. Besides, I get tired of crackers, cheese and smoked beef,"

Walking through the snow was by no means an easy matter, and the two boys had not gone far when they found the exercise beginning to tell on them.

Suddenly Jack touched Harry on the arm and motioned him to be silent. Both boys came to a halt, and the elder pointed over to his left.

For fully ten seconds nothing was to be seen. Then from over a fallen log appeared a pair of long gray ears, followed by the head and body of a fat bunny.

Bang! went Jack's gun, and the old fellow leaped up in the air, ran a few steps and then fell dead.

"Hurrah! you've the first one!" cried Harry, as both ran forward. "My! but he's a whopper!" he added, as he took up the prize by the hind legs.

"Yes, he'll do very well," returned Jack, with a smile of pardonable pride. "A few more like this and——"

He broke off short. The discharge of the gun and their approach had started up two more rabbits less than a rod off. They were scampering through the snow at top speed.

Harry took steady aim and fired. One of the bunnies was killed and the other seriously injured.

"After him or he'll get away!" yelled Jack, referring to the wounded rabbit, which was doing its best to drag itself out of sight in some brushwood.

With a bound Harry ran forward and caught the animal when it was still a yard from cover. A blow from the gunstock settled its career forever.

"That beats me," said Jack. "Three rabbits is not bad. Shall we go back with them?"

"We seem to have struck a good spot. Let us get what we can before the bunnies skip elsewhere."

So they went on, around the brushwood, and in among the trees in the vicinity. At first they saw nothing, but soon scared up three rabbits in a bunch.

Bang! bang! went Jack's and Harry's guns simultaneously, and two more rabbits were added to their list. The third animal escaped unharmed.

"That makes five," said Jack. "We are doing famously, to my way of thinking."

"Let us continue," returned Harry, with a good deal of excitement.

This was outing sport and no mistake.

So they went on, but no more rabbits appeared, nor did any other animals put in sight. They bagged half-a-dozen small birds, however, and then, with their game-bags well filled, returned to the camp.

Andy and Boxy had just arrived. Each of them had shot a squirrel, and Andy had killed a third with a stick of wood. They had also secured nearly two quarts of hickory nuts from one of the squirrel's nests.

"Now we are fixed for several days," declared Jack. "Let us save the rabbits and have a little squirrel on toast for breakfast."

"That's it," laughed Boxy. "Think of it, squirrel on toast! Delmonico's an't in it, eh?" and every one joined in the laugh.

Pickles had not been idle. Water was boiling over the fire, and exactly five big potatoes—portion of the small mess brought along—were roasting in the ashes beneath.

It was not long before the smell of newly made coffee and broiling squirrel filled the air.

A portion of the fire was dragged directly in front of the entrance to the hut, making the interior as warm as the kitchen of a house, and then the five sat down to a well-earned breakfast and dinner combined. That they enjoyed every mouthful goes without saying.

"Now, what's the programme for to-day?" questioned Boxy, when he was about full.

"At first let us give Pickles a chance to clean up, while we finish work on the hut and build a regular fireplace," returned Harry.

"That's it," added Jack. "Pickles can also tend to the animals we have killed, so they won't spoil. The hut must be put into shape, so that it will stand the wind and any storm that may come along."

"I don't think we'll get any more snow," said Andy, but the others shook their heads.

It was no easy matter to start work in the deep snow which lay on all sides of the hut, but they went at it with a will, Boxy whistling cheerfully, and Pickles singing merrily as he washed the dishes and pots.

More poles and brush were cut, and Jack, who had seen the thing done by hunters along the coast, showed how the brush could be twisted, one branch into another, until the sides of the hut were as tight as a wicker basket. They were braced by the poles, and then banked up on the outside, first by more brush and leaves, and then by snow.

After the sides were finished, the roof was overhauled and made much tighter than before. The number of

poles on the top were increased, until all was as solid as a city house.

"Now we've got a hut worth living in," cried Harry, as he surveyed the work done. "That will stay there for several seasons if not torn down by human hands."

"It's a pity we are not going to stay longer," grumbled Boxy. "Three days gone already!"

"But three days are not two weeks," said Andy, cheerfully.

The hut finished, they tackled the fireplace.

A dozen flat stones were sought for and found, and Jack showed them how a regular oven could be constructed. The uprights and the cross pole which had been used previously were allowed to remain, with the pot suspended over them, full of water.

"It's a good thing to have hot water any time you want it," observed Andy, and the others agreed with him.

By this time it was two o'clock, and they lost no time in preparing to go on the hunt.

"How Pete Sully and the others would envy us if they knew how nicely we were situated," observed Boxy.

"I'll bet they were mad when we left them to shift for themselves on the ice," put in Andy. "We'll have an account to settle with them when we get home."

"That's so, but I'm not going to worry," returned Harry. "Come on, fellows, let us see what we can start up between now and sundown."

And all together they started off on a hunt that was to be one of the most perilous of the whole outing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHASED BY WOLVES.

After some discussion it was decided to follow the course of the creek upon which they had pitched their camp.

This would aid them in several ways. It would prevent them from going astray and getting lost, and traveling was easier there than in among the trees and brush. Moreover, Jack was of the opinion that they would find more game along the creek side than elsewhere.

Every one was in excellent spirits, and had it not been for a warning from Harry, Boxy and Pickles would have started to sing and whistle.

"We will never get anything unless you remain quiet," he said. "It is hard enough to stalk anything without a dog."

"Oh, I ought to have brought Leo," burst out Boxy. "But Minnie wouldn't hear of it. She said it was bad enough for me to go, without taking him."

"Leo isn't a hunting dog, is he?" questioned Andy.

"A kind of one. He hasn't been trained very well."

"Then he would have been worse than none," put in Jack. "A dog is no good unless he is thoroughly broken."

"My ole man's dun got de dorg," put in Pickles. "But he would radder gib me his suit of clo's dan let me take

Woppy away. He t'inks moah ob dat dorg dan he does ob me, a heap sight."

"We'll get along all right," replied Jack. "But we must—hullo! here are tracks in the snow!"

"Hist! a rabbit, suah you boarn!" whispered Pickles.

Up came his gun. A tremendous report followed, and the colored youth went over backward in the snow. The heavy charge in the firearm completely demolished the rabbit, which had been close at hand.

"Did—did—I hit him?" gasped Pickles, as he scrambled to his feet with a wild stare in his eyes.

"Oh, no, you didn't hit him, you simply scattered him," returned Boxy, doubled up over the sight Pickles had presented as he went over. "You knocked him into six million pieces."

"Dat so?" Pickles gazed ruefully at the tufts of fur lying about. "By golly! dat was a most terribul shot, wasn't it?"

"I should say it was," returned Jack. "What made you load up so heavily?"

Pickles scratched his woolly head.

"I dun racken I loaded dat yere gun twice," he said, slowly. "I loaded her up yisterday, an' dis moanin' I did de same."

A perfect howl of laughter went up, and it increased instead of diminished when Pickles went around looking for enough of the rabbit to take back to camp. He was unsuccessful.

"Well, you can be thankful that the gun didn't burst and send you to kingdom come," commented Harry.

"Next time be sure to fire off the gun before you load again."

"You kin bet I will," returned Pickles, and he spoke the truth. All of his charges after that were somewhat light.

A little distance farther on they came across several more rabbits. Jack brought down one and his brother another. All the other boys fired and missed.

"We'll have rabbits if nothing else," observed Jack. "But I am in hopes we'll strike bigger game."

"A bear, for instance," said Boxy.

"Well, no, not exactly. But a deer wouldn't go bad."

"There ought to be deer around here," said Harry. "Barton Coils said we would find some sure."

"I suppose they are getting scarcer every year. Maybe we will have to go away back in the mountains for them."

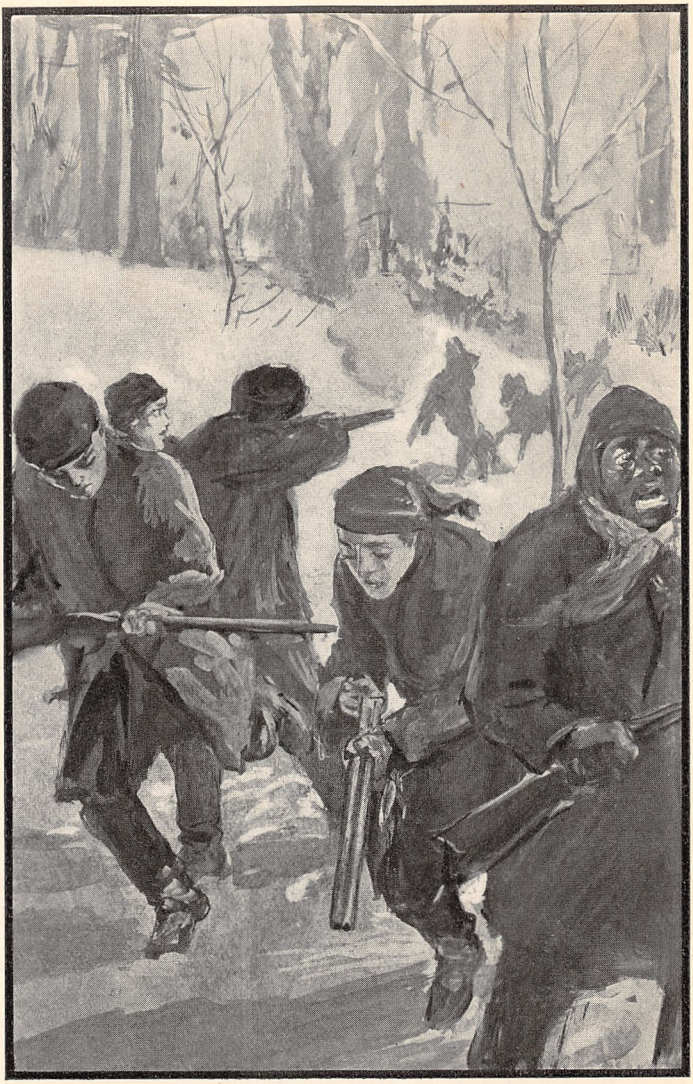
On and on they trudged, without another sign of a rabbit. But presently Harry drew attention to a squirrel hole, and a halt was made to see what it might contain.

They all loaded up, and then Boxy threw a snowball into the hole. Nothing followed, and then another snowball and a stick of wood were launched at the hole.

Instantly a squirrel's head appeared; his lordship looked out to see what was the cause of the disturbance.

Jack took quick aim and fired. The head disappeared, but whether the animal had been hit or not they could not tell.

"I'll climb up and investigate," said Boxy. "I have an idea there is more than one squirrel in that tree."



"Jack wheeled about and took hasty aim."

(See page 138)

"Yes, it looks hollow," returned Harry. "Let me give you a boost up."

"Don't you shoot me for a squirrel while I'm up there," laughed Boxy, and up he started.

"Humph! you don't climb like a squirrel," commented Andy, as Boxy gripped and twisted to gain the lower branches of the tree.

It was a struggle to gain those lower limbs, but Boxy finally accomplished it, and began to poke into the hole with a stick. Almost instantly a couple of squirrels sprang out and darted past him, and out to where the branches of another tree hung close.

One of the frisky animals made the leap in safety, and darted out of sight before those below could take aim at him.

The second was not so fortunate. He hesitated for an instant, and that proved fatal. Harry's gun spoke, and down he dropped at the young hunter's feet.

The shot, scattering through the branches behind him, frightened Boxy, who imagined that he was in danger of being hit, although such was not the case, as Harry was careful of what he was doing. The boy up at the squirrel hole shrunk backward, and then, to the amazement of his companions, disappeared entirely!

"Hullo! what does that mean?" cried Jack.

"Where in de world is dat feller gwine?" questioned Pickles, with his mouth wide open.

"Who?" asked Harry, who had been paying attention solely to the squirrel.

"Boxy has gone into a hole in the tree," explained Andy. "Hullo, Boxy, crawl out of that!" he shouted.

There was no reply. The boys stared at the tree and each other in wonder.

"Maybe he has gone clear to the bottom," suggested Jack.

"I'll climb up and see," returned Harry. "Give me a leg up, quick! He may be smothering!"

Jack assisted him, and Harry was soon up to where Boxy had been standing. Sure enough, there was a large hole, and Boxy was wedged into it at least seven or eight feet below the opening.

"Help me!" gasped the unfortunate boy, in a thick voice.

"Throw up a rope or a strap," shouted Harry, to those below. "He is way down, and can't help himself."

Several skate-straps, buckled together, were at once thrown up. Winding one end around his hand, Harry lowered the other.

"Got it tight?" he asked.

"Yes," returned Boxy. "But I'm afraid you can't haul me up—I'm wedged in that firm!"

"I'll see."

Bracing himself as best he could, Harry hauled away on the strap. The leather cut his hand a good deal, but to this he paid small attention.

At first Boxy did not budge. Then, with a groan, he came up a few inches. A tearing sound, as of clothing, followed, and finally he was raised so that he could get his hands on the edge of the hole. Then he helped him-

self; and soon both he and Harry were down among the others again.

Boxy's coat was torn in half-a-dozen places, but he gave scant attention to that. He was very thankful that he had been pulled out of the tree-trunk alive.

"Supposing I'd been alone when that happened?" he shuddered. "I was worse off than Jack in that pit on the other side of the lake."

"That shows the wisdom of keeping together," said Jack. "After this we will make it a point to go out together, or, at least, in pairs—never alone."

The journey up the creek was resumed, and they kept on until at least a mile and a half had been covered.

"Now I move we go back," said Jack. "It is getting late. To-morrow we can start out early, for there will be nothing to do around the camp after breakfast, which we ought to have by seven o'clock."

The others were tired and readily agreed. They had not seen any deer, but had found a run, and they were certain that, sooner or later, they would strike one or more of the much-prized beasts.

About a quarter of the distance to camp was covered, when, without warning, a doleful sound reached their ears, coming from directly in front of them.

"What's that?" asked Andy, as he came to a halt.

"Wolves!" cried Jack. "I did not think there were any in this section!"

"The heavy snow has driven them out to look for food," put in Harry. "We may have trouble with them."

"We can shoot them," said Boxy. "And they—here they come now!"

Boxy had hardly uttered the words when from a thicket rushed five lean and savage-looking wolves, snapping and snarling as they came toward the boys.

All fired their guns, and two of the wolves went down, mortally wounded. The others kept on, yelping and barking with increased savageness.

"Run for it!" yelled Jack. "They will tear us to pieces if they once get at us!"

And run they did, trying to load their firearms as they went.

Soon the wolves were close at their heels!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST OF THE WOLVES.

It certainly looked as if matters would turn out seriously for the five boys. The three remaining wolves were close at their heels, and so far no one but Jack had succeeded in reloading his gun.

The boys thought it odd that the three wolves did not stop to devour their dead companions. The truth was that every one of the savage beasts had received a portion of the scattering shot and was so enraged that it thought only of attack.

As soon as he had his firearm ready for use, Jack wheeled about and took hasty aim.

Bang! went the gun, and the foremost of the wolves keeled over, shot through the head.

"Good for you, Jack!" panted his brother. "I wish I could knock another of them!"

"Sling your guns over your shoulders and jump for the tree limbs!" called out Boxy, and an instant later he made a leap and drew himself up into a tree, where he was safe for the time being.

Andy quickly followed his example, and Jack did the same. Harry was just finishing loading, and kept on running.

The two wolves did not stop running, but went after Harry, snarling and yelping directly at his heels.

Then, with a lightninglike movement, the brave boy swung around, and, without bringing his gun to his shoulder, fired almost directly into the open mouth of the leading beast.

With hardly a sound, the wolf toppled over, knocking his companion down as he fell.

This gave Harry a moment's respite, of which the exhausted boy was not slow to take advantage.

He came to a tree whose branches were scarcely seven feet from the ground, and, with a jump, landed in several of them. He managed to haul himself up just as the remaining wolf made an unsuccessful attempt to bury his gleaming teeth in his leg.

But, alas! as Harry reached the branches in safety, his gun slipped from his hand, and went down into the snow under the wolf's feet!

He was now practically defenseless. And the worst of it was every one of his chums with their guns were at least a hundred feet or more away.

"Here's a fine mess!" he muttered to himself, as he looked down and surveyed the situation. "If I had that gun I could easily settle that fellow, but without it I can do practically nothing."

"Hullo, Harry! where are you?" sang out the voice of Jack, from a tree which was out of sight.

"I'm up a tree and I've dropped my gun!" was the dismal response.

"How about the wolves?"

"They are all dead but one, and he is sitting under the tree waiting to make a meal of me."

"If there's only one left I'll soon finish him!" responded Jack, quickly. "Just wait till I load up again."

"Look out there!" suddenly shouted Boxy, from another direction. "Here comes another wolf!"

A yelping from the woods left behind told that he was right. The beast stopped under the trees Boxy and Andy had climbed for safety.

Presently both boys fired on him, and he was mortally wounded. With a yelp of pain almost human he dragged himself out of sight through the brush.

"He's cooked!" cried Andy.

"Any more coming?" questioned his big brother, anxiously.

"Not that we can hear," replied Boxy, after a pause. "By the way, where is Pickles?"

That was a puzzling question. In their excitement all of the members of the Zero Club had forgotten the negro youth.

But they now had no time to think over the matter. Jack was determined to kill the wolf under Harry's tree. He saw to it that his gun was ready for use, and then dropped down into the snow.

He had hardly gone a dozen steps when the wolf saw him and made a rush forward. Taking hasty aim, Jack fired.

The shot struck the wolf in the side, wounding him just sufficiently to make him still more ugly. He flew at Jack with wonderful ferocity, knocking the boy off his feet and sending him flat on his back.

Through the tree branches Harry saw the disaster and

his companion's great peril. With a half-suppressed cry of horror he leaped to the ground and caught up his own gun.

The wolf paused for a moment when he saw that he was to be attacked in the rear. Then he again turned and flew at Jack's leg.

But ere he could bury his teeth into the flesh Harry hit him a resounding crack on the side with the stock of his gun. The blow, delivered with all strength, knocked the wolf away several feet.

Jack turned over and leaped to his feet. Then the wolf came at both boys.

For about ten seconds it looked as if the boys would have a hard time of it. The wolf was wary and took no chances. He was watching for an opportunity to leap at the throat of one or the other.

Finally he sprang at Jack, but just then came an unexpected shot from one side. It was so close it caused the wolf to drop almost at the boy's feet. He gave a yelp, turned over once or twice, and was dead.

They looked around and saw Pickles standing there, a smoking shotgun in his hands, and grinning from ear to ear.

"Dat's de time dat wolf got dun up fo' keeps," remarked the colored youth.

"Good for you, Pickles!" cried Jack, gratefully. "You saved my life!"

"Not as much as dat, I rackon," returned Pickles. "Is dis de las' ob de tribe?"

"I believe so," returned Harry. "Let us all load up and

be on our guard. There may be more of the pack that haven't yet arrived."

They followed this advice, and then walked back to where Boxy and Andy had been left. They were joined by the others, and then all five of the boys walked around to view their dead enemies.

"Six wolves isn't bad," observed Jack, grimly.

"That's so," returned Boxy. "But it isn't exactly the kind of hunting we are looking for."

"The deep snow drove them out for food," remarked Harry. "No doubt they followed up the trail of the dead rabbits and squirrels we are carrying."

It was decided to let the dead bodies lay where they were, Pickles cutting off their tails to secure the bounty offered by the authorities for the wolves' extermination.

It was long past daylight when the camp was reached. While the colored youth prepared the animals shot the others got supper ready.

"Maybe you don't know whar I was when dem wolves got after us," observed Pickles, while they were working.

"Where was you?" questioned Andy.

"I hid in de stump ob a dead tree. I had my gun ready fo' de fust wolf dat showed himself, but dat wolf didn't cum. Da all knowed better dan to monkey wid de end of my old paralyzer."

"Pickles would have pickled him," remarked Boxy, and then they all laughed.

The boys were tired, but not sleepy, and as it was a clear, moonlight night, they sat around the campfire long after supper, talking and singing. Pickles got out his

banjo, and made the woods ring with jigs and breakdowns, and the accompaniment to a ditty called "When the Cotton Am a-Bloomin'." All joined in the chorus of the song, and they kept it up until ten o'clock.

"Now, it's turn in without delay," ordered Harry. "Remember, we start off early to-morrow."

"If it don't snow like fury," put in Andy.

"No more snow for a week," said Boxy. "Just look, the sky is as clear as a bell!"

"I wonder how things are at home?" went on Andy, suddenly.

"Why, what put that into your head?" questioned Jack, turning to him quickly.

"Humph! I was wondering the same thing," remarked Harry.

"Maybe somebody is getting homesick," observed Boxy, and although he meant it for a joke, there was a little truth in the remark nevertheless, although not one of the boys would have admitted it for the world. Not that they wished to leave camp, only that they would like to have seen the family faces, if only for a brief moment.

They soon forgot the idea, however, in the preparations to retire. They helped Pickles haul a log and some brush to the fire, and then carried the various traps to the hut.

"Supposing a wolf comes here during the night?" said Boxy, suddenly, with a slight shudder.

"Not likely," rejoined Jack. "But you can sleep with one ear open if you wish."

"I will," returned Boxy, and he did.

Quarter of an hour later every one of the boys had

sought his corner and made himself comfortable. Soon all of them but Boxy were asleep.

Boxy tried his best to close his eyes, but in vain. He turned and twisted, counted a hundred, made himself a dead weight, and did numerous other things to induce sleep, but without success. He had a wakeful streak on, and when he dozed off it was not alone with one ear open, but with one eye also.

Presently he started up and sprang to his feet. Was he mistaken, or had he heard something moving around outside? He listened intently, but no sound but the crackling of the fire reached his ears.

"I would be willing to bet anything I heard a strange noise," he said to himself. "I'm going to investigate, though, before I wake up the other fellows."

And with his blanket still around him, he stepped outside of the hut.

A second later Boxy heard a long, low moan from the other side of the creek. He looked across in the direction, and then gave a yell of alarm that brought every one of his companions to his feet with a bound.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT COULD IT HAVE BEEN?

When the others reached the outside of the hut they found Boxy staring wildly, his eyes fairly bulging from their sockets. His face was a deadly white.

"What is it, Boxy?"

"What do you see?"

"Some wild animal, or what?"

"A ghost!" gasped Boxy. "A ghost, as sure as fate!"

"Where? where?"

"Across the ice—it just disappeared behind the trees!"

"There are no ghosts," returned Jack, in disgust.

"Certainly not," put in Harry.

"What did dat ghost look like?" asked Pickles, with interest. He was a firm believer in spirits.

"It was tall and white, and had two horns on its head," replied Boxy, with a shiver. "I never saw such a thing before in my life!"

"You must have been dreaming," suggested Andy, who took his brother's view of the matter.

"I wasn't dreaming. I heard a noise and got up to see what it was. When I reached outside I heard a low, long moan, and I looked across the creek, and saw it just as plain as day."

"Must have been that extra-heavy supper that didn't set well on your stomach," commented Jack.

"It wasn't anything of the sort," retorted Boxy, half angrily. "It was a ghost, or something like it. The moon was shining right on it."

"Maybe it was a man dressed in white," said Harry. "One of the old deer-hunters from up in the mountains."

"A hunter wouldn't go around moaning like a cow with the toothache," returned Boxy.

"Well, you don't mean to say that you believe in ghosts?" asked Jack, plumply.

"I never did before," replied Boxy, evasively.

"Well, let me tell you that there are no such things, never were, and never will be. Either you were dreaming, or the object was some man or some animal."

"Maybe you want to go after it and find out?" cried Boxy, quickly.

"That's just what I'm going to do."

"So am I," added Harry. "We'll take our guns and compel his ghostship to give an account of himself."

"You had better look out!" cried Pickles, nearly terror-stricken at the idea. "Dat ghost dun cotch you an' you nebber be hurd ob no moah!"

"Nonsense!" laughed Jack. "Which way did the thing go, Boxy?"

"It moved up the creek and then back."

"Do you want to go along and show us the way?"

Boxy hesitated, but to refuse would look too much like cowardice, and, somewhat against his will, he finally consented to accompany them. Andy said he would go, too, and, not to be left behind alone, Pickles joined the party,

but on the lookout to run for life at the first sight of a ghost.

Not a minute was lost by Harry and Jack, and once started, they set off on a run, Boxy between them. They were soon across the creek and hunting around the heavy brush and thicket of trees.

But though they searched for the best part of half an hour, they discovered comparatively little. There were a few large tracks in the snow, but these were dragged so none could tell what sort of a walking object had made them.

"Well, we might as well give up," said Andy, at last. "I am mighty cold, rousing up out of a warm sleep."

They searched around a little while longer, and then one after another returned to the camp. Pickles replenished the fire, and signified his intention to sit up for the balance of the night. It was then a little after three o'clock.

"I wonder what it could have been?" queried Harry, as he threw himself on his resting-place once more. "Boxy certainly saw something."

"Perhaps time will solve the mystery," responded Jack, sleepily, and he was right. The near future solved it in a most unexpected manner.

Boxy could not sleep at all after the excitement through which he had passed, and at five o'clock he left the hut to join Pickles by the side of the fire. He found the colored youth dozing away over the oven that had been built, and in great danger of having his woolly locks singed by the flickering flames.

He roused up Pickles, and by a little after six both had a fine breakfast ready. Then the others got up, one after another, and soon daylight broke, and Camp Rest was once more astir.

"Now for nothing less than two or three deer!" cried Harry, enthusiastically.

"That's the talk," returned Jack. "And we'll get them, too, if we go far enough up in the mountains."

"That is if we don't all get buck-fever and forget to shoot when we have the chance," laughed Andy.

"Da is lots ob fellers wot gits dat fever," remarked Pickles. "I reckerlect my dad a-speakin' ob a party ob six gen'men from de city gwine up in de mountains to shoot deer, and when day had de chance to knock ober foah of dem, not a single gen'men t'ought to pull trigger, an' de consekences was dat de deer all got away!"

"We'll try to do better than that," laughed Harry, and all agreed with him.

As they expected to be away from camp until sundown, enough meat and crackers were taken along to serve for dinner. This was stowed away in Pickles' haversack. Then the traps to be left behind were stowed away in the hut, and off they started on what was to be one of the best hunts of the outing.

Boxy wanted to take the sled along to bring back at least one of the deer, but Jack said they could make a drag, if they were lucky enough to get the animal.

Instead of following the creek, they now struck off directly for the mountains. The sunshine of the day previous had settled the snow, and crusted it over in

many spots, and they found traveling not as difficult as some of them had imagined.

"I trust we meet no more wolves," said Jack, as he and Harry trudged along side by side. "One experience with those chaps is enough."

"Especially such an experience as we had," was the reply.

"When will we get to the deer territory?" called out Andy, from behind.

"We ought to strike a run by eleven or twelve o'clock," replied Harry.

"Not habing a dorg is gwine to bodder us considerbul," remarked Pickles. "It takes a good dorg to stir up de animiles."

"Well, we'll do the best we can without," returned Jack. "Come on, for we have still several miles to go."

On they went, over half-a-dozen hills and creeks, and up steep rocks and across deep ravines. Sometimes they traveled rapidly, and at others with extreme caution.

"Don't fall into some hollow or hole and break a leg," was Boxy's caution, and it was a timely one.

Overhead the sun had been shining, but now it went under a bank of light clouds, and, as a consequence, it grew colder.

"I don't like the cold," remarked Jack. "But we can hunt better now than when the sun is too bright, to my way of thinking."

Twelve o'clock found them ascending the side of a long hill, the last before the mountains should be reached.

The thickets were almost impassable, and they looked in vain for some kind of a pathway.

"Don't make too much noise," cautioned Harry, as they proceeded. "Beyond this hill, I imagine, there is a wide valley, and if so, that ought to make a good spot for deer. We don't want to frighten any possible game."

"I'm most played out," muttered Andy. "We'll have to rest a bit when we reach the top."

"Unless we see something, we can stop and have dinner there," answered his brother. "Quiet now, for the top is not far off, and the wind will carry our voices down into the valley as soon as we reach the ridge."

They went on after this in silence, all following Harry and Jack in Indian file. Five minutes later the crest of the long hill was before them. With the greatest possible caution they crept forward and peered over into the valley on the other side.

At first they saw nothing. Then Harry motioned them to silence, and pointed to a little opening among the bushes far away to the south. Four animals were bunched together there, and a second look convinced all of the boys that they were deer.

CHAPTER XXI.

DEER HUNTING.

Every one of the boys took a good look, to make sure that he was not mistaken, and then they drew back several yards from the crest of the hill.

"Deer, and four of them!" whispered Andy, excitedly.

"We can't shoot them so far off," added Boxy.

"No, we have to get closer and on the other side of them," replied Harry.

"Why on the other side?" questioned Andy, impatiently.

"Deer always scent a person if he is to the windward."

"Oh, I see. Well, shall we cross the valley here?"

"No, we will have to go up to the north and make a wide detour behind that bit of woods," said Jack. "Come on, there is no time to lose. The deer may shift their position at any moment."

In the excitement of the moment all thoughts of the midday meal were forgotten. And they likewise forgot that they were tired. With such game in view they would have tramped five miles without a murmur.

Harry led the way along the ridge, taking care that they should not expose themselves to the view of the deer below. It was a tedious walk, especially to Andy,

who wanted half-a-dozen times to try a shot at long range.

At last they reached the crest of the hill, and began to climb down the other side. This was hard work, for fear of striking an icy surface and going down—no one could tell where.

It was half an hour before they stood in the valley. Here it was warmer, on account of the shelter from the wind.

"Now come on and we'll get to some spot directly behind the deer," said Harry. "Then we will spread out in a semi-circle and do our best to bag the lot."

Without another word, and scarcely daring to breathe, they moved along in the snow, their guns, and the rifle carried by Jack, ready for immediate use.

Luckily, there was a small rise of rocks between the game and the boys, and using this as a shelter, they approached closer and closer to the deer.

"Now all fire when I give the signal, a sharp whistle," said Jack. "Don't fire before, and don't forget to have a second charge ready for your guns."

With these instructions, he stationed Andy and Boxy in one spot, Pickles in another, and then went on with Harry.

Fifty feet farther Jack and Harry came to a halt, and selected places not over two yards apart.

"I'll take the one by the tree," whispered Jack. "You take any of the others you please. All ready?"

"Yes."

At that instant one of the deer raised his head and sniffed the air. Something had alarmed him.

Jack gave a sharp whistle, and up came the other deer heads.

Bang! bang! bang! went the rifle and the guns in a running fire. One of the deer leaped up into the air and fell mortally wounded. A second staggered off, shot in the fore legs. The others were apparently unharmed, and bounded off down the valley on the wings of the wind.

"Go for the wounded one!" shouted Harry, as he rammed another load into his gun. "I'm going after those other deer!"

And away he went, before Jack could utter a single protest.

Harry knew enough to keep out of sight, and to move along silently. He covered the ground with all the speed at his command, nevertheless, forcing his way through the woods and over rocks for nearly a quarter of a mile.

At this point the valley narrowed, and he was forced by the lay of the land to come out into the open.

As he had hoped, the two unwounded deer had come to a halt, and were standing on a rocky slope, looking back curiously, to learn what manner of fate had overtaken their companions.

They soon spied the young hunter, however, and turned to run on. It was then that Harry fired at the hindmost.

His aim was true, and the entire charge entered the

creature's back. He stumbled into the snow and rolled over and over.

Thinking him about done for, the boy ran forward to view his prize. Scarcely had he come within five yards, when the deer, a small but strong-built buck, scrambled up and charged upon him.

Harry leaped to one side in the nick of time. Had it been otherwise, those sharp prongs would have pierced him through and through. The buck staggered on several yards, and then turned and made a second assault.

Again Harry sprang out of the way. Then he started to run, but had gone scarcely thirty feet when he stumbled on an icy rock, slipped along a yard or two and fell forward.

The poor boy gave himself up as lost. But help was close at hand. The sharp report of Jack's rifle rang out, and over tumbled the buck, shot through the eye, and quite dead.

"Are you hurt, Harry? Did he buck you?" questioned Jack, quickly.

"No, I'm all right," panted Harry. "And thanks to you for killing him."

"You wounded him, didn't you?"

"Yes, his back is full of buckshot. But it only made him ugly. What of that deer that was wounded first?"

"Andy, Boxy and Pickles took care of him. This makes three out of four, and that is not bad."

Getting some branches, the boys made a rough drag and placed the buck upon it. Luckily, there was a little

creek running through the middle of the valley, and on the ice covering they slid their game down to the spot where the sport had first begun.

The others were waiting for them, and they set up a yell of delight when they saw a third deer had been brought down.

"Dis am sumfing to be proud ob, an' no mistake," observed Pickles. "My dad won't most beliebe me when I dun tell him ob it."

"We'll take along the horns and skins, and that will certify to our story," said Jack. "The question is, what's to be done with all of this meat?"

"It's a pity, but most of it will have to be left behind, I suppose," returned Harry. "Let us carry as much of the choice pieces as we can."

They set to work with a will to skin the deer, saving the heads just as they were. They were hard at work when a loud, drawling voice disturbed them.

"Wall, neow, jess tew look at thet!' exclaimed the voice. "Dew yeou boys mean tew say thet yeou killed the three of 'em?"

They looked around, and standing on the rocks beheld a tall, slim-built farmer, evidently of Yankee extraction, surveying the scene in wonder and admiration.

"Yes, we killed them," replied Harry. "Pretty good for one morning's hunt, eh?"

"Most etarnally good, young man—in fact, the best Josh Higginson hez seed in many a year. It does yeou proud, boys, take my word on it!'

"We are proud," returned Andy, honestly.

"I came deown here tew see if I could git a shot myself, but I guess it's tew late neow. Too bad, tew, for the old woman wuz calkerlatin' on a bit o' vension fer tew-morrow's dinner.'

"You can have some and welcome," returned Jack, quickly. "We do not wish it all, and cannot carry it to our camp on Rock Island Lake."

"Yes, he might as well take all that is left," added Harry. "It will only spoil here."

"That's so," put in Andy and Boxy.

Josh Higginson was greatly pleased. In truth, he was not much of a hunter, and it is doubtful if he could have brought down a deer even if given the chance.

He thanked them over and over again, and said he would go home and bring a sled and horse down to carry away the meat. He asked the boys about themselves, and said he hoped that they would have the best possible time during the balance of their outing in the woods.

"I have a tidy little place up tew the end o' the valley," he said; "an' if yeou come up thet way drap in, an' I'll treat yeou the best I know heow."

Not to get back to camp too late, they rushed matters, and half an hour later were on their way. Each was loaded heavily, but no one grumbled, for was it not the prize of the day they were carrying?

"Won't folks in Rudskill be astonished when they learn of all we shot!" exclaimed Boxy. "I guess they'll think we are regular hunters, true enough!"

"This meat will last us the balance of the outing," said

Harry. "So we won't have to worry about food any more."

On and on they went, over the hills, until, when it was growing quite dark, they came in sight of the camp.

"Home again!" sang out Andy, "and I am not sorry. Another mile would have done me——"

"Somebody has been here!" interrupted Harry, quickly. "See, the fire has been scattered right and left, and the oven torn to pieces!"

"Who could have been mean enough to do this?" put in Jack, angrily.

Then he stopped short, and both he and Harry made a rush for the hut.

A single glance around showed that their sudden fear was realized. The hut had been looted. Every one of their traps, including the sled, was gone!

CHAPTER XXII.

TRACK OF THE MARAUDERS.

For the moment both Jack and Harry were dumfounded by their discovery. They stared around the hut, and then stared at each other.

"What's the trouble?" asked Boxby, pushing his way inside behind them, and followed by Andy and Pickles.

"They have stolen the sled and all of our things!" burst out Jack, wrathfully.

A shout of dismay went up.

"Who did it?"

"Where have they gone?"

"Can't we go after them?"

"I can't cook no supper widout a pot or a kettle," added Pickles, dubiously.

"And we won't have supper until we have our things back," returned Harry, quickly. "I'm not going to sit still and have my blankets and the rest stolen."

"Nor I! Nor I!" shouted the others.

"Most likely it was tramps," commented Boxby. "I wonder how many of them."

"Light up some torches and we'll take a look around," ordered Harry, and the suggestion was carried out with all possible haste.

But the search, minute as it was, revealed but little.

Every article of value had been carried off, the oven destroyed, and evidence was not wanting to show that the marauders had tried in several places to ruin the hut.

"It's a burning shame!" burst out Andy. "It was bad enough to steal the things, without ruining what was left."

"It's a piece of maliciousness, that's just what it is," returned Boxby. "It looks like the work of a personal enemy."

"But we haven't any personal enemies up here," said Andy. "We left them behind in Rudskill."

"Ain't it mos' too dark to go aftah dem fellers?" asked Pickles.

"It is dark," replied Jack, "but by taking torches we can follow the footprints, I think. There is nothing else to do. We can't go to bed without our blankets very well."

"Come on, there is no time to lose," urged Harry, and, hanging up their deer meat and the heads and antlers, they started off, each with a blazing pine knot held aloft of his head.

The track of the heavily-laden sled led across the creek, and off along the shore of Rock Island Lake. They counted the footsteps of three persons who had dragged the sled along. In several places the footsteps showed all around the sled.

"That is where they had to stop to secure the load," remarked Harry. "I suppose they loaded so hastily that it kept slipping off. See, here is one of the tin plates."

And he picked up the article from where it lay, half buried in the snow.

The plate was turned over to Pickles, and a sharp look-out was kept for more of their belongings, which resulted in the finding of another plate, two knives, a fork, and one small tin kettle.

"At this rate, we'll find all of the stuff at the end of two or three miles," observed Harry. "The careless, good-for-nothing fellows! how I would like to face them just now!"

And the look on his face showed that he was far from being in a pleasant humor.

About a mile from the creek the track turned directly toward the lake, and a hundred feet farther on was lost on the clear ice, the snow having been blown in patches by the high wind.

"Here's a state of things!" grumbled Boxy. "We can't follow that trail on the ice very well."

"Let us take a look ahead," suggested Jack. "They might have turned on the ice for a short distance merely to destroy the trail."

They looked on and also all about them, and even ran out on the lake for a short distance, but it was useless. The trail was lost and could not be picked up again.

At last the boys ceased their search, and gathered in a crestfallen group to discuss the situation.

"It's the worst thing that could happen," said Boxy. "We can't continue to camp without our things."

"No; unless we can get cooking utensils and blankets, we'll have to go home."

"It's too dark to do more to-night," said Jack. "Let

us make ourselves as comfortable as possible and take up the search again as soon as day breaks."

"That's the talk!" cried Harry. "We won't give up till we catch those rascals and recover our belongings."

This proposition suited every one, and, thoroughly tired out from their extra tramp, they returned to the hut.

Pickles set to work with a will to build up a roaring fire, and to protect them from the cold while they slept without blankets this was placed as closely to the opening of the hut as they dared to put it.

The small kettle came in handy for heating water, and a haunch of venison was soon spitted over the fire. Despite their downcast spirits, the boys all ate heartily. When they had finished, everything was left in readiness for an early breakfast in the morning.

Luckily, it was not extra cold, and the wind came in such a direction that the hut was greatly sheltered. So, although somewhat cold, the boys still managed to put in a fairly comfortable night, sleeping as they did, in their overcoats, with the fire just outside of the door.

At the first streak of dawn in the east, Harry was up, and he quickly aroused the others. Ten minutes later they were eating breakfast.

"We'll have to take some provisions along for dinner," said Jack.

"There is nothing else to take but deer meat," grumbled Andy. "Those chaps took everything, even our squirrels and rabbits."

"Well, we won't starve on deer meat," returned Harry, as cheerfully as he could; "but, nevertheless, we'll have

an account to settle with those fellows when we catch them."

"Maybe they'll defy us," said Boxy. "Some tramps are mighty nasty."

"What of that? We are all armed," said Jack, and the look on his face told that he was willing to fight for his own every time.

Pickles' haversack was soon packed with cooked deer meat, the fire was banked up for the day, and then off they sat in quest of their belongings.

The sun was just rising over the hills, and it promised to be a fair day, with but little wind. Through the brush and trees the ice and snow glittered like silver and pearls, making the prettiest of pictures.

The boys had their guns loaded, and before they came to where the trail moved down to the lake, Andy caught sight of a squirrel, and shot the pretty animal.

"There; that will give us a taste of something else besides deer meat," he said, with some satisfaction, as he hung the game over his shoulder.

When the lake was reached, they halted as they had the night before, and gazed around in hopes of seeing something which might have escaped them in the semi-darkness.

But not a clew came to view in the vicinity. All around was the glittering ice, that was all.

"Let us divide up into two parties," said Harry. "One party to go along the lake, and the other to go part of the way across, keeping an eye on the various drifts on the ice. The trail is bound to turn up somewhere before long."

"Supposing we get separated?" asked Boxy.

"Fire a gun if you want to find the others, and fire twice if the trail is found," suggested Jack, and so it was settled.

Boxy, Andy and Pickles started off across the ice, while Jack and Harry continued along the lake.

"It's my opinion they came this way," observed Jack. "It's a long journey across the ice on foot."

"That's just my opinion, too, Jack. Besides, if they were going to cross the lake they would have done it from the mouth of the creek, instead of picking a way through the snow and brush so far."

"I've been wondering if that ghost, as Boxy calls it, had anything to do with this," went on Jack, slowly.

"Perhaps. The plunderers might have thought to scare us away from camp. When they saw that wouldn't work, they waited for us to go off on a hunt."

"It looks natural, doesn't it? Well, let us hope we'll clear up the whole affair before night."

On the two went along the lake, moving close to the shore, and examining every little cove that presented itself.

Presently they came to another creek, about the same size as that upon which the camp was situated. It was comparatively free from snow.

They might have gone up this," said Harry. "What do you think?"

"Perhaps. But let us continue up the lake," returned Jack.

"Supposing you keep on, while I run up the creek a few hundred feet. If I see nothing, I'll soon join you."

"All right."

Jack turned to the shore once more, and was soon out of sight. Harry proceeded up the stream, keeping his eyes open on both sides for anything that might look like the trail.

He had scarcely moved onward a hundred feet when a low cry escaped him. Stooping, he picked up the top of a coffee pot. He recognized it as belonging to the outfit of the Zero Club. He had found the trail again!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE COTTAGE IN THE WOODS.

To make sure that he was not mistaken, Harry continued to search in the vicinity of the spot, and presently he discovered the tracks of the sled through a tiny drift of snow on one side of the creek, twenty feet farther on.

Without hesitation he fired his gun, and, loading hastily, fired a second shot. Then he sat down impatiently to await the arrival of the others.

Jack might have joined him in a few minutes, but he wisely waited at the mouth of the creek for Andy, Boxy and Pickles, that they might not go astray along the shore.

Soon the four boys hove in sight, all eager to learn what he had discovered.

The top of the coffee pot was exhibited, and Harry's story told, and then, with their hopes revived, they started up the creek, eager to trace the trail to its end.

It was not long before the creek began to narrow, and here the ice was covered with snow, through which it was easy to follow the tracks.

"Here's where they left the creek," said Harry, ten minuates later. "See, they moved off directly through the woods."

"But it's a roundabout course," observed Jack, "and that proves that it was new ground for them to cover."

"Will rob an honest farmer's hen-roost, will yeou?"

(See page 174)

Presently they came to a deep ravine, and saw that the marauders had walked along this in both directions, looking for a place to cross. Being unable to find it, they had continued along the ravine until its upper end was reached, and then struck out through the thick woods between two hills.

They must have visited the camp early in the morning," said Boxy. "Otherwise, they couldn't have come so far before nightfall."

"It's my opinion they came in right after we went away," said Andy. "Maybe they were watching for our departure."

"Dat's de ghost did it!" burst out Pickles. "I'll bet my ole hat on it!"

"I guess the ghost was one of the party," said Jack, dryly, and Boxy started and suddenly turned red.

No more was said just then, Harry at that moment catching sight of a partridge and firing. He caught the bird just as it was going up with a whirr, and brought it down almost at the party's feet.

"There, Andy, now we can have three kinds of meat instead of two," he laughed, and put the bird in his game bag.

"It must be nearly noon," said Jack, a few minutes later. "Wait till I look at my watch." He unbuttoned his overcoat and his jacket. "Quarter to twelve."

"I knowed it was about dat, kase I'm so hungry," replied Pickles.

"We can stop for dinner if you say so," said Harry.

It was so agreed, and, coming to several fallen trees,

they rested and ate their venison. Andy wanted to cook his squirrel, but it was voted by the others that this would take too long.

"Those fellows can't be very far off," said Harry. "And the sooner we overtake them the better. It's more than likely they'll use up all our coffee, crackers and other stuff if they are given half a chance."

The midday meal was soon over, and, somewhat refreshed by their brief rest, the boys moved on with renewed vigor.

"We are in the very depths of these woods, said Harry. "See how thick the trees are."

"Supposing we get lost?" put in Boxy. "Those fellows might have lost their way for all we know."

A minute or two later Jack fancied he saw some sort of an animal moving through the brush to his right. He made a dash for it, calling to the others to wait until his return.

He was gone but a short while, and then they heard him yelling for them to come to him.

They soon joined him, and discovered that he had killed a strange-looking beast, not unlike a wildcat. He had a desperate struggle with the animal, and his clothing was torn in several places.

"It was a blow on the back that settled him," he said. "I must have paralyzed his backbone. What a horrible-looking thing!"

"Are you going to take it along?" asked Boxy.

"No, leave it where it is. It gives me the creeps to look at it!"

And Jack shuddered over his narrow escape.

They were about to turn back to the trail when Harry gave an exclamation of surprise, and pointed through the trees to their left.

"A cottage!"

"It is true enough!" exclaimed Andy. "And right in the middle of the woods! How queer!"

"I wonder who lives there?" asked Boxy.

"He must be a regular hermit, whoever it be," vouchsafed Harry. "He couldn't choose a more lonely spot!"

"Maybe the fellows who robbed us live there!" cried Boxy, suddenly.

"That's so," returned Jack. "Go slow, boys, and be on your guard!"

With extreme caution they approached the cottage, which was a long, one-story affair, very much dilapidated. The door and the windows were tightly closed. There was no smoke coming from the crumbling chimney, and nowhere about the place were there the first signs of life.

"It's deserted," said Harry, and he kicked open the front door with his foot.

The banging of the door startled a number of birds up among the eaves, and they flew out of the cottage in a bunch before any of the club members could fire at them.

"Hullo, in there!" called out Boxy, but no answer was received, and the five boys stepped inside.

"Deserted, true enough," remarked Jack, as he and the others gazed around.

"Yes, and for a good number of years," rejoined Harry. "Just look how thick the cobwebs hang everywhere. I dare say no one has been here for years."

"You are right, for even the fireplace is falling down," said Andy. "I wonder who ever built away out here in this lonely spot?"

"Some chap who was tired of the world, most likely," laughed Jack. "Say, boys," he went on, suddenly, "do you know what I think that animal I killed was?"

"What?"

"A house cat, or a house cat's offspring, gone wild. Didn't it look like it?"

"Dat's so," put in Pickles. "Like as not dat animal's great-grandmudder was de pet hyar, and when de pusson wot libed hyar died or moved away, de cat had to shift fo' herself."

"And so she became a wildcat, and joined the other wildcats around here," finished Harry. "It may be so—stranger things have happened."

Jack was in for leaving the deserted cottage at once and continuing on the track of those who had plundered their hut, but the others demurred.

"Let's take a look around first," cried Boxy. "It's fun to strike an old place like this. Let's see what we can find. Perhaps we'll unearth a treasure."

"Not likely!" laughed Jack. "But there are some few old dishes in the pantry collection hunters might go wild over," he went on, as he brought out half a dozen of the delicate blue ware variety.

"Let us take them along!" said Andy. "Evidently the original owner is dead, or has given up all claim to them."

He and his brother continued to sort over the stuff in the pantry, while Boxy and Pickles took down several articles from the wide, old-fashioned mantelpiece.

"Here's a candlestick from revolutionary times," said Boxy. "I'm going to take that along and put it in father's war collection."

"An' dar is an ole tinder box," cried Pickles. "We kin use dat if we run out ob matches."

"Here's a bean pot half full of moldy beans," called out Andy, presently. "Shouldn't wonder if the fellow who once lived here was a Yankee."

"And here's a book on money!" shouted Jack. "Here is a name: John Applegate, his book, January 1, 1824. Phew! over seventy years ago! He must be dead by this time if he was, say twenty, when he got the volume."

"He was more than that," returned Boxy, "for here is his name over the door: John Applegate, 1814. He built this cottage eighty years ago. Would you believe it! I should think it would tumble down in that time."

"It was strongly built, and has probably been repaired from time to time," said Jack. "But, whoever he was, John Applegate is probably dead and gone now, so we can take what we please from here."

"I'm glad to hear that!" shouted Harry from the next room. "For I have found something that is indeed a treasure."

"What is it? What is it?" cried the others, and they rushed to where he was kneeling in front of a worm-eaten chest.

"A stocking full of old coins!" he returned, and he held it up for their inspection.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HARRY'S PRIZE.

"Is it gold?" queried Jack, as he and the others clustered around their kneeling companion.

"Not quite, but there is some silver there," replied Harry. "Wait till I spread the coins out on the bench over there."

He walked to a bench beneath one of the windows, and, turning up the stocking, which was covered with mold, and ready to fall apart, he allowed some forty coins of all sizes to roll out.

"Not a gold coin in the lot!" sighed Boxy. "And I was thinking you might have struck a fortune!"

"Here are half a dozen silver coins, worth at least twenty-five cents to a dollar," said Jack, as he handled them one after another. "Just see how old they are! Some of them date away back to sixteen and seventeen hundred!"

"I have an idea they are worth a neat sum," said Harry, with sparkling eyes. "You must remember that coin collectors pay pretty good prices for some coins."

"By creation! I never thought of that!" cried Andy. "Maybe there is a fortune after all."

"The collection is certainly worth something," said Jack, slowly. "And I hope, for Harry's sake, that it proves valuable, for the find belongs to him."

"We'll share and share alike," began Harry, but the others cut him short. They all loved their companion, and were only too glad to throw a chance of making something in his way.

The coins were carefully sorted over, and then Harry tied them in his handkerchief and put them in a safe place inside of his clothes. He calculated that the collection ought to bring him in at least fifty or a hundred dollars, and to a person in his reduced circumstances this was worth obtaining.

After this, the remainder of the contents of the chest, consisting of some clothing and a few books, which fell apart as soon as removed, was taken out. There was nothing more of value.

On the walls of the cottage were found several old engravings representing a naval battle and several religious executions. Jack took these and placed them flat in his game bag.

"It's about time now that we got back to the trail," he said. "We have lost an hour here."

"Well, I for one don't begrudge the time," said Boxy, and all, especially Harry, said the same.

With a last look around, they left the cottage, shutting the door behind them. It was the first time that the place had been visited for years, and perhaps it would be even longer before it would be visited again.

They were soon on the trail again, and hurrying along as fast as the roughness of the country would permit. Up one hill and down another they went, around great rocks and across numerous tiny streams, until at last

they struck the end of the valley in which they had shot the deer the day previous.

"I must confess I am tired," remarked Andy, with an effort. "We must have covered a good many miles since we started."

"We have," returned Jack. "But I—hold on, what is that ahead?"

As he uttered the last words, Jack motioned the others to stop. At the same time he pointed to where a rough lean-to rested against a wall of rocks all of twenty feet high.

"That's some kind of a ranch," returned Harry. "And, my gracious! there is our sled standing outside!" he burst out. "Boys, we have found those fellows at last!"

"Bettah be cahful," warned Pickles. "Da may be mighty tough customahs to deal wid!"

"See that your guns are ready," ordered Jack, sternly. "We'll lay down the law to them, no matter who they are."

Every member of the Zero Club at once complied. Boxy was a trifle nervous, but he did his best to hide it. Jack and Harry, as the natural leaders of the crowd, went to the front.

Before the lean-to ran a small mountain stream, now frozen solid. Between that and the shelter smoldered a fire, and around this were scattered a large quantity of chicken feathers and the heads of two of the barnyard fowls.

"They have evidently been having a chicken dinner,"

murmured Harry. "Wonder why they didn't go out and shoot some game?"

"Maybe they are no sportsmen," returned Jack. "It is very seldom that tramps are. And, besides, if they would steal our traps, they wouldn't hesitate to carry off some farmer's chickens."

"There doesn't seem to be any one around," went on Harry, after a pause, in which all of the party surveyed the situation as closely as possible.

"Perhaps they have gone off on a hunt. Hullo!" Jack went on, in a loud voice.

No answer came back, and no one appeared in sight, so, without further hesitation, the five boys walked boldly into the camp and began to inspect it.

As has been said, their sled stood upon the outside of the lean-to. Inside were their traps, nothing missing but a plate or two and one of the pots.

"Thank fortune we have recovered our stuff!" exclaimed Jack. "Had it been otherwise, our tour would have come to a most inglorious end."

"These fellows have blankets and cooking utensils of their own," remarked Harry. "Now, what could possess them to steal our stuff?"

"They expected to cart it off and sell it, most likely," replied Andy. "Those blankets would bring ten or twelve dollars at least, and the other articles several dollars more."

"Shall we wait here till they come back?" asked Boxy.

"Certainly we'll wait," returned Jack. "We'll give them a piece of our mind if nothing else."

"Dar is only t'ree of dem," said Pickles. "An' we is five ag'in dem."

"Besides, we'll lay for them and take them by surprise," added Harry. "Ah! there are our rabbits and squirrels tied up in a tree."

And he started at once to cut down the game.

"That proves they must have had those chickens before they struck our camp," said Andy. "I wonder how soon they will be back."

"Here come four men on horseback!" suddenly cried Harry, with a glance down the valley.

"Four men!" cried Jack. "Sure enough! They can't be the fellows that belong to this place."

"Maybe they do."

"But there are only outfits for three here."

"They may have found a companion," suggested Boxy.

"And what of the horses?" questioned Jack.

"If they would steal our stuff, they would steal horses, too," returned Harry. "Perhaps they are a regular set of backwoods outlaws."

"We'll be on our guard!" cried Boxy. "Those fellows have discovered us, and are riding for this place just as fast as they can."

Boxy was right. The four horsemen had been proceeding somewhat slowly, but now they started on a gallop, the foremost pointing with extended arm toward the lean-to.

"I don't like the looks of that crowd," said Harry, as they drew closer. "Every one of them has a shotgun over his saddle."

"See! see! they are aiming at us!" cried Andy. "They evidently imagine we are going to run away!"

"Hold on, you fellows!" roared the leading horseman, as he drew within hearing distance. "Don't you dare to stir unless you want to get a dose of buckshot into you!"

The boys gathered into a group near the fire, and a few seconds later the horsemen surrounded them, each with his shotgun ready for use.

"There be them chickens, Jim, ez sure ez you air born!" cried one of the men. "I told yeou them rascals cum this way!"

"Will rob an honest farmer's hen-roost, will yeou!" burst out another of the men. "Four o' 'em an' a coon! Put down yeour guns, yeou scamps, or we'll fill yeour hides so full o' shot yeou can't stand!"

Simultaneously, the four men sprang down into the snow, and came forward. At a glance it was plain to see that they were a quartet of hard-working and honest farmers.

"We'll march the lot o' 'em over to Bagsville, and have Squire Riggins sit on the case," said the leader. "We'll teach 'em how to come up here an' steal our lawful property!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

The boys listened in silence to what the farmers had to say. They realized at once the natural mistake the men were making. The chickens the owners of the camp had cooked had been stolen, and these four tillers of the soil supposed the members of the Zero Club guilty of the crime which had been committed.

Jack was the first to speak, and a faint smile showed itself around the corners of his mouth as he lowered his shotgun and began to explain the case.

"You are making a great mistake," he said. "We know nothing of your chickens. We do not belong at this camp."

"Tell thet to yeour grandmother!" retorted the foremost farmer. "I know better."

"My friend speaks the truth," put in Harry. "Our camp is away off on the shore of Rock Island Lake."

"None o' yeour darn yarns now!" growled another of the farmers. "If I an't mistaken, yeou be the very feller I seed around the barn tudder evenin'!"

"You are mistaken. But I don't wonder your chickens were stolen. We had all our traps taken, and we came here to get them back."

"Gee shoo! Can't thet boy tell a yarn, though?"

chuckled the tallest of the farmers. "He must hev been a-makin' it up fer fear we would cotch him!"

"It is no yarn!" retorted Harry, flushing up. "I am telling the plain truth. We are not the owners of this camp, and we know positively nothing of your fowls."

"We are above taking chickens!" burst in Boxy. "We can shoot all the game we wish, and more."

"So we can," added Andy. "Do we look like chicken thieves?"

"Wall, I reckon a coon makes a good hen lifter!" laughed the smallest of the farmers, with a nod toward Pickles, which made the colored youth mad clear to his heels.

"Look heah!" he cried out, shaking his gun threateningly; "yo' can't consult me dat way, yo' low down white trash! A chicken lifter, indeed! Moah likely yo' is one yourself!"

"What's thet? Don't yeou talk tew me!" roared the farmer, bristling up like a turkey cock. "Maybe yeou don't know who yeou be a-talkin' to?"

"I don't know, nor care!" retorted Pickles. "I ain't no chicken lifter, an' if yo' go fo' to say so, yo'll git yo'self into a big muss wid me!"

"Here, we've had enough talking," put in the first man who had spoken. "Put down your guns, every one of you, and be quick about it!"

"I won't put down my gun!" cried Jack. "And if you molest me, you will regret it, mark my words!"

"We are respectable boys from Rudskill, and you

have no right to come here and threaten us," added Andy.

"We'll see," growled the farmer. "What do you say?" he went on to his companions. "Shall we take 'em to Bagsville and have 'em up before Squire Riggins?"

"Thet's the talk!"

"It will be a darn good lesson to other chicken thieves!"

"Sure, Seth; take 'em up!"

"Thet settles it, then, along yeou go, every one. Yeou kin do with yeour traps ez yeou please."

"I'll not budge a step!" replied Harry, firmly.

"Nor I Nor I!" burst out the other boys.

"We'll see!" howled the leading farmer, his face growing dark with ill-suppressed wrath. "You can't defy the laws of the country, see if you can!"

"If you'll only listen to reason," put in Jack. "Perhaps we can prove——"

"Them air chicken heads ez enough for us," burst out one of the farmers. "Thar's the head o' the best Leghorn I had!"

"You'll come along with us, and right neow!" put in another. "No more plaguety foolin' about it!"

The farmers came closer, and it looked as if there would be a struggle and possibly bloodshed.

But just then a call was received from up the valley, and looking in the direction, all saw a man striding along through the snow, a horsewhip in his hand.

As he drew closer, the boys saw that the new-

comer was Josh Higginson, the man to whom they had given the deer meat.

"Have yeou got the fellers, boys?" he called out, to the other farmers.

"Yeou jess bet we hev!" replied the leader of the men on horseback.

"Why, by gum! ef it an't the fellers thet give me the venison!" roared Josh Higginson, in amazement.

"Oh, Mr. Higginson, perhaps you can help us out here," burst in Harry, quickly.

"Yes, you evidently know these men," added Jack.

"Wall, I guess I do know 'em, seein' ez how they are all neighbors o' mine."

"Say, Josh, do yeou know these 'ere fellers?" asked the leader on horseback.

"They air the fellers thet give me all thet venison yesterday—the boys ez shot them three deer in one lick."

"They claim we are chicken thieves," said Harry. "They believe we belong to this camp, while I told them our camping place is away off on the shore of Rock Island Lake."

"They told me their camp wuz over tew the lake," said Josh Higginson. "An' they air such good shots thet it an't likely they stole the chickens at all."

"We have a squirrel and a partridge with us," went on Harry. "And here are a number of rabbits, too."

"And we get all the chicken meat we want when we are home," finished Boxy. "We didn't come out here for that at all, and I wouldn't touch either chicken or

turkey just now, unless I was forced to. We are out solely to hunt and live on game."

"I believe the boys speak the truth," said Josh Higginson. "They look like an honest set of fellows."

One after another the faces of the horsemen fell. They whispered for a while among themselves, and finally the leader turned to Harry.

"What's this you tried to tell us about yeour traps bein' stolen?" he asked.

In return Harry told their story, to which the others added such details as they saw fit. The tale took some little time, and the boys now found that they had five close listeners.

"Wall, thet's the worst yet, ef it's true," said the leading farmer.

"An' I guess it ez true," burst out Josh Higginson. "Fer I saw them three fellers skulkin' around my farm only this noon!"

"These are all our traps," said Jack, pointing to the loaded sled. "Their traps are in the shelter yonder."

"Then it's likely they be coming back," said the stout farmer. "Supposin' we stay here an' lay low for 'em?"

"Thet's the talk," put in another of the farmers. "An' if those boys are honest they'll stay with us."

"We expected to get back to camp before dark," replied Jack, slowly. "But I'm willing to stay if the others are. I would like to meet those three chaps."

"So would I," added Harry. "Let us stay."

"We'll stay and help you give them a warm recep-

tion," said Boxy, with a look that made every one of the farmers laugh.

Josh Higginson had come out looking for a sheep that had escaped from his pen, and after a bit he left the crowd.

It was now growing dusk, and Harry suggested they leave the vicinity of the lean-to and hide behind some brush that was not far distant.

"If we remain here the owners of the camp may see us before they get very close and turn tail and run," he said.

"But their things be here," said one of the farmers.

"Perhaps they would rather lose those than be locked up for chicken stealing," said Jack, and subsequent events proved that he was right.

A few minutes later the entire party withdrew to the bushes Harry had mentioned. Here the horses were tied to several trees, and a fire was built, at which those that felt cold proceeded to warm themselves.

An hour went by and still no one came near the lean-to. By this time it was quite dark, and the boys wondered what they should do if they were compelled to remain in the vicinity all night.

"I have it!" cried Andy. "We have our traps and can bunk in the lean-to."

"That's the idea!" said Boxy. "Won't they be mad when they find we have taken possession?"

Jack was on guard at the edge of the brush, with one of the farmers, watching for the return of the

camp's owners. Presently a shout went up, followed by the discharge of a gun.

"Something is up!" cried Harry, as he hurried to the front, followed by the others.

"We seen one o' the rascals," cried the farmer, who held a smoking gun in his hand. "He was beyond yonder rocks!"

"And who do you suppose it was, boys?" exclaimed Jack, almost breathlessly. "Pete Sully!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE UNSUCCESSFUL PURSUIT.

The other members of the Zero Club could hardly believe their ears. "Pete Sully!" they cried in unison. "You must be mistaken."

"No; I saw him as plain as day," returned Jack, with a decided nod of his head.

"Then the three must be Sully, Bill Dixon and Len Spencer!" cried Harry, quickly. "What will you bet they haven't followed us from Rudskill to start up a rival camp? I knew they envied our going away."

"Harry has dun struck it," put in Pickles. "Didn't I hear dat Pete Sully sayin' to Spencer dat he wasn't gwine to be beat by dat Harry Webb's crowd?"

"And I'll bet that explains the ghost, too," put in Andy. "They were trying to scare us away from our camp."

"But they must have come up here first," commented Harry, slowly.

"They could do that. Perhaps they took the train to Rudd's Landing, or maybe they came direct to Bagsville instead of up the river. That would give them plenty of time to settle down here before finding our camp."

"Who is these air boys yeou be talkin' about?" put in one of the farmers, impatiently.

In a few words Harry explained about the bully of the town and his friends. The farmers listened to as much as they wished to hear, and then one of them suddenly cut him short.

"Ain't no more time tew talk; let's go arfter 'em," he said. "Come on!"

He grabbed his gun and made off through the snow, and one after another the boys and men followed, only one farmer and Pickles remaining behind, to watch the horses and the traps.

The pursuing party were soon at the rocks behind which Pete Sully had been seen. Here not only one set of tracks, but three, were visible, showing that the trio were together.

The tracks led in a zigzag fashion through the woods, testifying to the fact that in their alarm and fright the plunderers had dashed away without knowing what direction to pursue. Evidently, they had in some manner learned what had happened, and were completely demoralized by their discovery.

After leaving the woods, the tracks led across a deep ravine, and then down to a large pond at the lower end of which was a creek, which the farmers said emptied into Rock Island Lake. Here on the clear ice the trail was lost in the darkness, and could not be found again.

"No use to hunt further," said one of the farmers. "Let us go back."

The boys were willing, and the return to the brush

near the lean-to was at once begun. It was now quite dark, and the farmers were in a hurry to get home.

"Folks be a-worryin' abeout us," said one of them to Harry. "We didn't calkerlate to stay out so late."

When the brush was reached the farmers mounted their horses and rode down to the lean-to. Here they overhauled the traps left by the owners of the place and took along all of the blankets and many of the other articles.

"If yeou see them fellers, tell 'em tew call on Ira Goodsell, or Dick Pomfett, in Bagsville Deestrict, fer their things," chuckled one of the farmers to Jack. "If they don't allow as how they care tew call, let 'em stay about in the cold without nuthin' tew keep warm o' nights, ha! ha! ha!"

And with a laugh all around, the four farmers bade the boys good-by and rode away as fast as their farm nags would carry them.

"That leaves Pete Sully and his followers in a nice stew, truly!" laughed Andy. "I wonder how long they will care to camp out without blankets or cooking utensils?"

"It serves them right!" burst out Boxy. "They had no business to go robbing hen roosts and get us into such a mess of trouble."

"Not to mention the fact that they carted our stuff off," put in Harry. "But they are paid off now."

"And as we have our traps and full possession of their lean-to, we ought not to complain."

"Maybe dey will cum down on us durin' de night," suggested Pickles.

"I hardly think so," returned Jack. "However, perhaps we had better stand guard. We can take turns of an hour and a half each, from nine o'clock on."

This was agreed to, and a little later they had made themselves at home in the lean-to and were busy preparing supper.

Pickles cooked the partridge to perfection, and this, with tea and crackers, made a very acceptable repast. All of the boys were worn out, and they did not remain awake long after they had finished and the dishes had been cleared away.

Jack took the first watch, with Pickles next. Then came Andy, who, in order to keep awake, walked outside and replenished the fire, and then kept on his feet.

Andy's watch was nearly finished when he heard a crackling in the brush some distance to the left of the lean-to. He looked intently in the direction, and presently saw a pair of gleaming eyes bent full upon him.

The eyes were those of some wild animal, which had been attracted to the spot doubtless by the scent of the dead game. The animal uttered no sound, but continued to glare at Andy in a manner that caused the young boy's blood to run cold.

The fascination of that look was so intense that Andy was for the time being transfixed to the spot. He stood motionless, making no movement toward getting his gun or arousing his sleeping companions.

The animal, apparently satisfied that there was no

danger to be encountered, moved forward slowly, until its entire body was exposed in the glare of the campfire.

Then it again paused, and it's short, powerful tail began to sweep quickly from side to side, as it prepared for a spring.

It was at this critical moment that Andy came to himself, and he let out a shriek that could have been heard for a quarter of a mile.

Whizz! the animal's body sailed past the lad, who, as he shrieked, sprang back a pace or two, and landed close to the front of the lean-to, where hung several of the dead rabbits.

The long, white teeth were snapped together over the backs of two of the dead game, and then, with a leap to one side, the wild and half-famished animal vanished into the gloom behind the neighboring rocks, just as Jack and Harry, guns in hand, tumbled out to see what was the matter.

They found Andy leaning up beside the shelter, too faint to stand alone. For fully half a minute he could not speak, but pointed excitedly toward the rocks.

"A tiger, or wildcat, or something!" he gasped, at last. "Gone with the rabbits!"

"Can't be a tiger!" returned Harry.

"I thought I saw a wildcat when we were in pursuit of Pete Sully and his crowd," said Jack, quickly. "Let's take a look."

"Be careful!" exclaimed Andy, in wild alarm. "It's

the worst creature you ever saw! It nearly paralyzed me by a look!"

"They are awful!" put in Boxy, making his appearance, followed by Pickles. "I don't want to have anything to do with it."

But despite the protests of the others Jack and Harry insisted on going after the marauder. They looked to their guns and provided themselves with torches.

Their hunt lasted for nearly half an hour without success. Evidently the wildcat had taken itself off to its lair with its prey.

After that the boys slept with one eye open, and the one on guard held his gun in readiness for immediate use should the wildcat, or any other animal, put in an appearance. But this precaution was unnecessary, for the balance of the night passed without further interruption.

After breakfast the things were packed once more, and they started on the return to their own hut by the lake.

"I suppose if we wanted to be mean we could tear down their lean-to," said Jack.

"Don't touch it," returned Harry. "The loss of their traps is punishment enough for them, to my way of thinking."

So the shelter was left undisturbed, and soon the valley in which it was situated was left far behind.

It was no easy matter to find the way back to the lake, and dragging the heavily-laden sled over the uneven ground and the rocks was the hardest kind of

work. They took turns at the job, and frequently stopped to rest.

"This shows how anxious those fellows were to spoil our outing," remarked Jack, during a breathing spell. "The three must have had an everlasting hard time of it getting the traps to the lean-to."

"I wonder what they will do, now their own things have been taken," said Harry.

"Like as not they'll have to go home in disgust," said Boxy. "And that's just what I hope they will do."

"An' we kin crow ober dem when we gits back!" chuckled Pickles.

And then the walk to the camp was resumed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HEAVY STORM.

On Sunday of the week the boys remained about the camp, doing very little of anything. Early in the morning Pickles took Boxy with him and showed him how to spear fish through a hole in the ice. The fish made an excellent dinner.

Toward evening it began to cloud and blow up from the northwest. Half an hour later it was snowing furiously.

"This is going to be a storm, and no mistake," said Jack, as he went out toward the lake shore to take a look around. "It is a good thing we have plenty of meat and other stuff on hand."

"Do you think we will be snowed in?" asked Boxy.

"I do, and it may last for several days. The best thing we can do is to gather together all the firewood we can and stack it up just outside of the hut. Then when the snow gets too deep we can build a snow-hut and have the campfire inside."

Jack's suggestion was followed out, and by bedtime they had a pile of wood stacked against the hut that was nearly as high as the hut itself. The oven was rebuilt closer than ever to the doorway, and a projecting top was built over the latter, so that the snow might not drift too rapidly into the interior of the hut.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Pete Sully and his companions, and all of the boys were inclined to believe that the bully and his followers had been forced to return to Rudskill.

Despite the fact that the snow was coming down thickly, the wind increased in violence until, as Pickles put it, "dar was about de nearest approach to a blizzard wot could well strike dat paht ob de country."

The whistling of the wind through the trees was music to the boys' ears, however, and after building up the fire in the best manner they could devise, they rolled themselves in their blankets, and gave themselves up to their dreams.

It was after eight o'clock when Harry awoke and aroused the others. The sled, which had been placed upright in the doorway, was taken down, and in tumbled a great mass of snow.

"My gracious, boys, just look at this!" cried Harry. "The snow has drifted up against the hut until it is over our heads!"

What he said was strictly true. Outside of the doorway all was a mass of white. Even the campfire had been completely snowed under.

"We are in for it now, and no mistake," murmured Boxy. "We won't be able to get out for a month!"

"Nonsense!" cried Jack, cheerily. "Come, boys, we must shovel the snow away and get the fire started up for breakfast."

"And how are we going to shovel snow without shovels?" queried Andy, dubiously.

For a moment a look of comical dismay went around the little group. Then Harry partly solved the problem.

"Let's take the tin plates for a starter," he said. "After breakfast we'll try to cut out some wooden shovels with the ax and our pocket-knives."

Fortunately, the tin plates made very respectable shovels, although using them nearly broke their backs. However, in the course of half an hour a space about six feet square in front of the hut was cleared, the snow being banked up all around, with the idea of later on building a snowhouse.

"The heat from the fire will make the snow pack better," said Harry. "Now for breakfast. I am as hungry as a bear!"

"I'm as hungry as two bears, and I can't bear my hunger any longer," said Boxy.

"That's a bare kind of a joke," grinned Andy.

There was a general laugh. Pickles lit the fire, which roared and leaped in the wind. The smell of broiling venison soon put every one in good humor.

It had ceased snowing, but the sky was still dark and threatening.

"We'll have more by night, mark my words," said Jack. "It has really just started."

After breakfast the boys hunted up some long sticks, and to one end of each they either nailed a flat board whittled from a split-up log or bound a mass of stout twigs.

"Now we have both shovels and brooms," cried Jack.

"Whoop, now, it's workin' on de corporation, Oi am, do ye moind!" he went on, strutting around with one of the brooms on his shoulder.

"Well, I hope you work a bit faster than street men usually do," returned Harry. "If you don't, we won't have much done by nightfall."

"Oi'll outdo yez all, so Oi will," exclaimed Jack, and he sailed in with a vigor that left no doubt that he meant what he said.

The first work was to enlarge the circle outside of the doorway. This accomplished, Harry, Jack and Andy started to build the snowhouse, while Boxy and Pickles climbed up to get the snow from the roof of the hut, thus relieving them of any anxiety concerning the top of their domicile caving in.

It was no easy matter to build a snowhouse about the fire, but the boys worked with a will, and by three o'clock in the afternoon the task was finished.

The walls of the new structure rose nearly ten feet, and were three feet thick. The entrance to it was from the hut, and a narrow passage-way which led toward the creek. The top was roofed over, except in the center, which was left open to let the smoke from the fire escape.

"I don't know if that is going to last or not," said Harry. "But we can try it anyway."

"It will last if it remains cold," returned Jack. "But if it gets milder, and the fire blazes up too hotly we'll have to 'stand from under,' as the saying is."

"I don't believe it is going to get any milder just

yet. If anything, the thermometer is going down steadily."

"That is because it is going toward evening. But we'll know more about it in the morning. One thing is certain: hunting is knocked endways for a day or two."

After the work outside was finished, they had another meal, a dinner and supper combined, and then withdrew into the hut, where Pickles tried to liven up matters by playing his banjo and mouth harmonica and singing half-a-dozen songs. The boys joined in the chorus of the songs, and soon they were as gay as if the elements were perfect for the furtherance of their outing.

"If we have to stay in to-morrow, I am going to try my hand at making some traps," said Andy. "I want to trap something before we go back."

"So do I!" cried Boxy. "Pickles, you must put us in the way of this."

"I will, suah!" responded the colored youth. "My dad learned me all about traps when I was knee-high to a mosquito."

"I don't know what you can trap here," said Jack. "But it will do no harm to try your luck."

Before they went to bed they looked out, and found it snowing again, harder than ever. The wind was rising, too, causing the branches of the trees to creak ominously.

"Supposing some of those branches should break off

and come down on the top of the hut?" asked Boxy. "Wouldn't we catch it?"

"It would have to be a pretty big branch to do much damage," replied Harry. "Jack and I saw to it that the poles were put up quite firmly."

"We don't want to get smashed to bits while we are asleep."

"I doubt if the wind is yet high enough to break down very much. You must remember these trees are very tough, and, standing together, one protects another."

"But if the wind should blow stronger——" insisted Boxy.

"It will wake us up, and we can be on our guard," replied Harry, and there the subject was dropped.

On account of the extreme cold, Pickles was very particular to keep a good fire, and for that purpose placed several small logs on the brush.

"Yo' see we don't want for to wake up in de moahnin' all froze to deth!" he explained.

"Or so stiff that we'll have to set each other up against the fire to thaw out," laughed Boxy. "My! but it's cold, eh?"

"With so much snow it ought to get warmer," grumbled Andy.

"It will be warmer by to-morrow, I think," said Jack. "We can thank our stars that we have such a comfortable shelter."

With a last look at the fire, Pickles retired to his corner of the hut. Soon the colored youth was snoring peacefully, and the sound made all of the others sleepy. One

by one they lay down and rolled themselves in their blankets, Jack being the last to retire.

How long he slept he never knew. He awakened with a sneeze and a cough, which did not come from the cold. He sat up and rubbed his eyes in a dazed way. What was the matter?

Suddenly a puff of smoke nearly strangled him. The smoke was followed from the outside by a streak of flame! Then he realized what was the matter. The campfire had set fire to the hut!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FIGHTING THE FLAMES.

The instant that Jack realized that the hut was on fire he let out a cry that brought all of his companions to their feet at a bound.

"What's the matter?"

"Where does all this smoke come from?"

"The camp is on fire, boys!"

"We must get out or we'll be burnt to death!"

There was a wild scramble for the doorway, but Jack held every one of them back.

"You can't get out that way!" he exclaimed. "The fire is all around there. See there, now!"

A fierce gust of wind at that moment caused the flames to shift about, and the doorway, which had been almost black before, now became a sheet of living fire!

"We are penned in!" groaned Andy. "What in the world shall we do?"

"We'll be roasted like so many pigs, suah!" howled Pickles. "Heaben have mussy on us!"

"We must cut a way through one of the sides!" cried Harry. "Where is the ax?"

In a trice he had the implement in his hands and was working madly to cut away enough of the matted branches and twigs to afford them an opening sufficient to allow of the passage of their bodies.

In the meantime, the smoke kept growing thicker and thicker. The wood was all damp from the quantity of snow upon it, and smoked much more than it burned.

"Hurry, or I'll—be—choked!" gasped Boxy. "I—I can't—breathe—any longer!"

"Lie down on the ground and you'll breathe easier!" returned Jack.

He threw himself down, and all the others but Harry followed his example.

In a minute more Harry had a small opening. This he enlarged as rapidly as possible. Soon he was able to crawl through, and he did so, calling on the others to follow.

"That was a narrow escape!" cried Andy, as he took a deep breath of the cold, pure air that was sweeping up the creek and through the woods. "The hut's a regular smokehouse, isn't it?"

"We must do something to save it," put in Jack, hurriedly. "All our things are in there, and we can't afford to lose them."

"What shall we do, we have no water?" returned Boxy.

"I kin cut a hole in de ice an' fill de bucket," said Pickles.

"You do that, Pickles, and we'll do what we can with snow," said Harry. "Come on, boys, snow is as good as water, if we use enough of it."

Spurred on by the necessity of the occasion, and also by the novelty, the members of the Zero Club set to work with a will. Standing as close as they dared, they shoveled and threw great lumps of snow on the hissing flames,

working first upon that portion of the fire nearest to the door of the hut. They were pleased to see that the flames were confined principally to the large fuel pile leaning against the hut, not to the hut itself.

"I think we are getting the best of it," cried Jack, after five minutes of hard work.

"We are," returned Harry. "But it is by no means out yet. Keep up the good work, all hands!"

Pickles had succeeded in chopping a hole in the ice on the creek, and now came back with a bucket of water.

"Give it to me, and I'll run through the doorway and plant it on any blaze inside!" cried Jack, and bucket in hand, he disappeared into the hut.

"It's all right in there, so far," he said, on reappearing. "Go on with the snow."

They continued to fling the huge chunks of snow on the flames until all that remained was a small fire several yards away from the hut entrance.

"Might as well leave that for a camp-fire," suggested Harry. "We want something to keep us warm and to see by."

"Phew! but I am warm enough just now!" exclaimed Boxy, wiping the smut and perspiration from his face. "That's the hardest work I have done in some time."

"Be careful that you don't catch cold," warned Harry. "The wind cuts like a knife to-night."

"What time is it?"

Jack consulted his watch. It was four o'clock in the morning. By a general vote the boys decided that no more sleep would be indulged in for that night.

"We can't rest in the hut anyway," said Andy. "All is in disorder, and some of the blankets are wet."

"We will hang all the wet things around the campfire to dry," said Jack. "And then we will see what we can do to repair damages."

"And in the future we'll be careful how we build our fires," added Boxy. "Not so close to the hut, please, Pickles, after this."

"Dat's it!" cried the colored youth. "I dun reckon I'se 'sponsible fo' dis muss," he went on, soberly.

"We ought all of us to have known better," said Harry, frankly. "In the future we must either keep the fire farther off or else somebody must sit up and watch it."

The conflagration had destroyed the greater part of the snowhouse, and after the blankets had been hung up to dry, and the hut put in shape once more, they set to work to rebuild the tumbled-down walls. This was hard work, but it had to be done, so no one grumbled.

By daylight the camp was once more in shape, and the only evidence left of the fire was a few charred sticks and the long icicles which hung from the top of the hut and the branches of the trees.

"We can thank Providence for escaping with our lives," remarked Jack, earnestly, as they sat down to a hastily-gotten breakfast. "If something hadn't woke me up we might all of us been burnt to death while we slept."

"It was truly a fortunate escape!" returned Harry.

"And one I shall never forget," added Andy.

"We are having enough adventures for one outing," laughed Boxy. "I wonder what will happen next?"

"Nothing much to-day, I imagine," said Jack. "See, it is snowing again."

He was right. While they had been fighting the flames it had ceased, but now the white flakes began once more to drift downward, at first sparingly, but thick and fast by the time the morning meal was over.

"This means a day in camp, I suppose," grumbled Boxy. "My! when will it stop?"

"When the clouds are empty," laughed Harry. "Boxy, make the best of it, and be thankful we have enough to eat."

"We'll set to work making traps," suggested Jack. "Pickles, come on and give us a lesson."

They withdrew into the hut, leaving the fire to take care of itself. They brought several pine torches with them, and these, along with a sperm candle, made the interior of the place tolerably light.

For several hours they sat grouped around the colored youth, while he, with a jack-knife, half-a-dozen thin slabs of wood, some stout twine and several pliable switches, showed them how to construct a squirrel trap, a rabbit trap, and also traps for various birds.

"But we can't do nuthin' wid dem jess now," remarked Pickles. " 'Cos we can't find no runs in dis snow."

"Do traps have to be set in runs for wild animals?" asked Boxy.

"Da don't hab to be, but it's generally best; yo' ketches dem quicker."

After making traps, the boys began to play various games, such as throwing the knife, and who's got the bean, and the like. In this manner time went by until it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon.

They had had a lunch at noon of crackers and cheese, expecting to wait until evening before getting another regularly cooked meal, but now both Andy and Boxy declared that they were hungry again, and it was voted that they should go out, stir up the waning fire and get ready to cook a bit of venison in the pot with several onions Pickles had been thoughtful enough to bring along.

"You see, we needn't be afraid of the onions, because we are not going out in company this evening," said Boxy, in imitation of a young society miss. "So, Mr. DeBrown won't have a chance of catching my breath."

"I wonder how things are at Rudskill," remarked Harry.

"I suppose our folks keep thinking about us," said Andy. "They'll imagine we are completely snowed under and starving."

"Yes, it's a pity they don't know we are so comfortable," put in Jack. "A good shelter, and plenty to eat are big things out here just now."

"Hark!" cried Pickles, who stood by the doorway, ready to go out. "What am dat?"

"I don't hear anything," said Andy, after a brief pause.

"I heard a scratching," put in Harry, in a whisper.

"It's some wild animal after food," returned Jack, in an equally low tone of voice.

"What can it be?' questioned Andy.

They were silent after this, and soon the scratching could be heard quite plainly.

Then, before they could realize it, something sprang upon the top of the hut.

"The deer meat!" cried Harry. "It is all outside, hanging on the tree limb!"

"And so are the rest of the rabbits!" put in Jack. "We must go outside and shoot that creature, whatever it is!"

Jack caught up his gun, as did also Harry, and together they sallied forth in the howling snowstorm.

At first amid the swirling snow they could see nothing. Then Harry caught sight of an immense wildcat making off with the venison in its mouth.

He took hasty aim and fired. None of the shot reached its mark, and an instant later the wildcat was gone, before Jack could get any show at it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BLUE TIMES IN CAMP.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" exclaimed Harry, in deep disgust.

"It's too bad!" returned Jack. "And he had the last of our venison, too!"

The other boys now came out of the hut, and matters were speedily explained to them.

"Never mind; we have the rabbits left," said Boxy, with a sigh of relief, as he saw that two of the dead bunnies still hung on the tree limb.

"That's so," returned Harry. "But two rabbits won't last five boys very long, to my way of thinking."

"An' de crackers an' cheese is most gone, too," put in Pickles. "We dun got to shoot or trap somethin' soon, or starve."

"Or live on fish," said Andy, hopefully.

"De trouble is, yo' can't always git de fish when yo' wants dem."

It was useless to think of going off after the wildcat, and after a look around, to make sure that no more marauders were about, the boys set to work to prepare a meal of rabbits stewed with onions—a most palatable dish, and one which all hands enjoyed.

"Let us see if we can't set a trap for the wildcat," sug-

gested Boxy while they were eating. "Pickles, couldn't you fix something strong enough to hold him?"

"I might, wid de sled rope an' a limbery young tree," replied the colored youth.

"Catching the wildcat now would be like locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen," grumbled Jack. "However, catch him if you can, and then he won't be able to worry us any more."

So, after the meal was finished, and all that was left was carefully stowed away, they set to work to build the trap, which, when finished, was baited with bits of such meat as remained uncooked.

By five o'clock it was dark, and once again they sought the hut, which now had the appearance of a regular home to them. The blankets were dry, and Jack took the largest pot and brought it in filled with live embers from the fire. This warmed up the place, and the ruddy glow pleased them besides.

They tried to be cheerful during the long evening, but were not as successful as they wished. They could not help thinking of the almost empty larder, and wondering how they should restock it.

The night passed without interruption. The wind blew strongly, sometimes causing the trees composing the corner posts of the hut to bend slightly, and the snow came down steadily. At eight o'clock in the morning the situation remained unchanged.

"Deeper than ever," muttered Harry, as he gazed out of the doorway. "Boys, this is getting serious."

"It is, when we are running low on food," said Boxy.

"We've got about enough left for one square meal, and that's all."

"Anything in the trap?" asked Andy.

"You would have heard of it before this, if there was," laughed Harry. "It's just as you fellows left it last night."

"I suppose that confounded wildcat knows we haven't anything worth coming for," grumbled Boxy, gloomily. "What's to be done, anyway?"

"We'll have breakfast and then hold a council of war," replied Jack.

Their rather limited meal was soon over, and then they commenced to discuss the situation.

"It won't do to stay in the hut and wait for it to clear off," remarked Harry. "For it may snow two or three days yet."

"Supposing I tries fo' anodder fish or two?" suggested Pickles.

"Yes, go and get all the fish you can," said Jack, and the colored boy hurried off without delay, taking his spear with him.

"Somebody ought to go out on a hunt," said Andy. "I'll go if no one else will."

"You had better stay home," replied Jack. "If anybody goes it will be myself."

"And I'll go with you," said Harry. "What do you say if we start at once?"

"Let us wait till ten o'clock. It will be a bit warmer then and also lighter."

The two at once began their preparations for leaving

the hut. They wished they had snowshoes, but no one of the party had the least idea how a home-made pair could be constructed so as to be of real value.

"I guess we had better follow the creek," said Harry. "If we go right into the woods we may get lost in the snow and be unable to find our way back through the storm."

"You are right," returned Jack. "Hullo, here comes Pickles on a run!"

"Something is wrong!" cried Boxy. "He looks scared."

"What's the trouble, Pickles?" called out Harry.

"Jess my luck, when we needed dem fish de worst way," groaned the colored youth. "I oughter be kicked full ob holes, dat's a fack!"

"What is it?"

"I dun strike at a big fish, an' lost de spear!"

"Lost the spear?" cried Andy, in dismay.

"Dat's it."

"Did he pull it away from you?" questioned Jack.

"No, de cord broke, an' dat fish went swimmin' away wid de spear in his tail."

"Well, that is too bad," put in Harry.

"De wust of it is I ain't got no udder spear along," said Pickles, gloomily.

"Can't you make a spear?"

"I don't t'ink I kin. Howsomeber, I kin try," and the colored youth brightened up a bit.

"Do so, and if your home-made spear won't work, try to snare 'em or catch 'em in some other way," said Jack.

"And we'll help you, while Jack and Harry go gunning," put in Andy.

As Jack had predicted, by ten o'clock it was both warmer and brighter, and he and Harry set off in fairly high spirits, despite the snow which lay in their path.

On one side of the creek the snow was swept away for the greater part, and along this cleared track they made their way, keeping a sharp lookout ahead for possible game.

"We ought to strike a few rabbits or squirrels, if nothing else," said Jack.

"Unless the heavy storm keeps them from venturing out. It's hard to find much in weather like this."

"But rabbits must come out for food, even if the squirrels stay in."

"They have their runs, and it's hard to find them in the open. But come on, we'll do our best toward gaining something for the larder."

On and on they went, now over a cleared spot, and then again through a drift several feet high. It was tough walking, and before a mile had been covered both were puffing and blowing like a couple of porpoises.

"Let's rest for a few minutes!" gasped Harry. "This takes the wind out of a fellow!"

"So it does. Come on behind the brush, where it is sheltered."

They found a cleared spot where some thick bushes would protect them from the keen wind and here sat down on a pile of rocks to rest. They had been out just an hour without catching sight of the first thing to shoot.

"How I would love to stumble into a lot of partridges or wild turkeys!" exclaimed Jack. "Wouldn't we just blaze into them, though?"

"Even a flock of birds wouldn't be bad, Jack. Anything for food when the pot is empty."

"You're right. We mustn't rest here any more than is necessary."

They were about to proceed on their way, when Jack suddenly caught his companion by the arm.

"Look! look! A screech owl!" he whispered.

And the next moment he had his gun to his shoulder and was blazing away at a mass of red and white feathers, perched high up in a neighboring tree.

There was a terrific screech, and then down tumbled the big bird almost at their feet.

He was not quite dead, but a blow from Harry's gun soon settled him, and he lay still in the snow.

"Is he any good for food?" asked Harry, as he surveyed the game.

"He's better than nothing, that's certain," said Jack. "I'll take him along. If we don't strike anything else, we'll eat him, and if we do, I'll cart him home and have him stuffed."

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND STARVING.

With the screech-owl in Jack's game-bag, the two boys continued on their way up the creek.

It was something to have bagged even the carniverous bird, and they felt elated to think that at last something had appeared to be shot at.

By twelve o'clock they calculated that they were close on to two miles from camp. Each was hungry, and another halt was called for the purpose of eating the scanty lunch with which they had provided themselves before starting off.

"We must not go too far off," said Harry. "For it will never do to attempt to remain away over night in this fearful storm."

"That's true," returned Jack. "By three o'clock, game or no game, we will turn our faces homeward again."

"If it would only stop snowing, it wouldn't be so bad. But this storm is the worst I've seen in years!"

"It's a corker, truly! But come on. Every minute counts now!"

Once more they pushed on, the snow swirling around their heads. Their legs ached, and it was an effort to make the smallest kind of progress. The cold, too, was intense, and at times seemed to strike into the very marrow of their bones.

By the time they had covered another mile they grew discouraged. Not the first sign of game of any kind had appeared.

"I move we leave the creek," said Harry, at last. "We won't go very far off, and we'll locate the way so as not to get lost."

"All right, we'll try it, although it isn't a safe thing to do, Harry. But we must risk something for the sake of filling our game-bags."

"There is a hollow over to our left, with an overhanging cliff of bushes and trees. I have an idea we may find something under that. It would afford a good shelter for wild animals."

"Like a wildcat, for instance," laughed Jack.

"Well, I guess wildcat is just as good to eat as screech owl, if only we can lay him out without our being torn to pieces."

Taking a good look around, so as to locate the vicinity in their minds, they struck out in the direction Harry had indicated. The creek was soon left behind, and they found themselves going down the side of a long hill.

Luckily, there was a bare stretch on the hillside, otherwise they would have been compelled to move on in snow up to their waists. But the cleared run was where the wind blew the strongest, and this now took them almost off their feet.

"Never mind; we'll be safe under the rocks and brush," shouted Harry, to his companion, above the roaring of the storm. "Look out so that you don't roll down into some hole and out of sight!"

"My! but it's awful!" cried Jack. "Here, give me your hand, or we will be separated and won't be able to find each other again."

They took hold of hands, and the next instant the wind threw them down on the hillside and rolled them over and over to the bottom.

They landed in a doubled-up mass in the midst of a large drift. Jack went in head first, with Harry behind him. For a moment there was nothing to do but to flounder around until they could regain their feet.

"Ugh! but that was a cold dose!" cried Jack, as he scraped the snow from around his neck and wrists. "We came down with a rush, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did that," returned Harry. "It's a good thing our guns didn't go off in the tumble."

It was no easy matter to extricate themselves from the big drift. The snow was all around them, and at the very first step forward, they went down to their armpits.

"Hold on!" cried Harry, in alarm. "Turn up the hill, or we'll be over our heads!"

So they turned about and half walked, half crawled up to solid ground. Here they could hardly keep their feet, so strong was the wind.

"There is a clear space to our left," said Jack. "Come on! We will soon be under the cliff!"

Away he went, with Harry close behind him. The shelter under the trees and bushes was not less than two hundred feet away.

As they advanced, a peculiar sound broke upon their

ears. Jack heard it first, and called Harry's attention to it.

"What can it be?" he said.

"Sounds like some sort of a bird," replied Harry. "Let us have our guns ready. We do not wish to lose any game, now we have come so far for it."

On they went, with caution now, and their shotguns ready for instant use. They were within a hundred feet of the shelter, and could see the dim outline through the driving snow.

"Wild turkeys!" suddenly called Harry. "Be careful, we must get as many of them as we can!"

He motioned to a little cleared space just ahead. Then, with guns pointed, they ran forward.

Bang! bang! Both of the firearms spoke in rapid succession. There was a rush and a strange squawking sound, and then the greater part of a flock of wild turkeys had disappeared in the storm. But the heavy charges had hit three of them, and they were now floundering around in their death struggles. The boys ran forward and soon put them out of their misery.

"That's a good haul!" cried Jack, enthusiastically. "Now we won't starve for a day or two at least."

"Right you are," returned Harry, as he picked the game up, placed two in his own bag and one in his companions, and hurried to reload. "But we mustn't miss any other game that may be here."

"Certainly not," said Jack, and he reloaded also, and away they went along the bottom of the cliff.

In a few minutes they stirred up a whole flock of wild

birds of several kinds from the brush under the rocks. They fired in the midst of them, bringing down several woodcock and three sparrows.

"That isn't bad," said Jack, as he picked up the woodcock and allowed the sparrows to remain where they were. "It was a good idea of yours to come here."

"I was in hopes we might strike a deer," returned Harry. "But we have now about as much as we can conveniently carry through such traveling as this."

"There ought to be some rabbits or hares here, under the old brush. Let us walk to the end of the shelter and——"

"There's something now!" shouted Harry, raising his gun. "Half-a-dozen hares, as sure as you're born! Quick, Jack!"

Once more the two shotguns spoke, and two of the hares were seen to leap into the air and turn over in a heap. When the two boys reached the spot they found their prizes stone dead, each shot through the head. All the other hares had disappeared behind a thick mass of brush, where they could not follow them.

"Now we've got enough, surely," said Harry, as they divided the game between them. "Wild turkeys, hares, woodcock and an owl, not to mention those sparrows. Who could ask for more?"

Jack did not reply, as he was busy getting out his watch.

"Phew! How late do you suppose it is?" he cried.

"Three o'clock?"

"Quarter-past four! We must start back at once!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Harry. "It's going to be a job to get up out of this hollow and find the creek again, and it will be dark before we know it."

"Not only that; but the snow is coming down in perfect blankets. We'll be buried in spite of ourselves if we don't put our best foot forward."

"Come on down to the end of the shelter and make a beeline for the creek," said Harry, as he slung his gun over his shoulder. "We can escape some of the wind by going that way."

To this Jack agreed, and in another minute they started off side by side.

They had almost reached the end of the overhanging rocks when a low cry of distress broke upon their ears. They came to a halt, and gazed at each other in wonder.

"What was that?"

"It sounded like a human voice."

"Help! help!" came faintly to their ears, and now they located the cry. It proceeded from a small cavelike opening but a few feet away.

They ran forward, and a moment later saw a sight that appalled them beyond measure.

There in the snow, huddled in a miserable group, were Pete Sully, Bill Dixon and Len Spencer, a fixed look of despair on each of their pinched and frozen faces.

"Why, Sully——" began Harry.

"Give me something to eat, please!" broke in the big fellow, staggering to his feet. "Something to eat!"

"Yes, yes, give us something to eat!" chimed in Bill Dixon and Len Spencer, imploringly.

Harry and Jack looked at them in amazement. A single glance was enough. The bully of Rudskill and his companions were almost starved to death!

CHAPTER XXXI.

IMMEDIATE WANTS SUPPLIED.

It is no wonder that Harry and Jack were for the moment so dumfounded that they could do little else than stare at the sight of the three haggard and pinched faces which gazed imploringly into their own.

"Don't say you won't give us anything," cried Pete Sully, seeing they did not reply. "We are starved—we haven't had a mouthful to eat since yesterday morning!"

"My gracious!" It was Jack who uttered the exclamation. "Nothing to eat since yesterday morning!"

"It's too bad, Sully," put in Harry. "We'll cook you something just as quick as we can."

"Never mind cooking it; give us one of those birds raw!" cried Dixon. "We can't wait."

"Here is a bit left of our lunch," said Jack. "Eat that while we are building a fire. What's the trouble—couldn't you shoot anything?" he went on. "And why haven't you a fire?"

"We lost our matches—they were in our traps, which were taken from us, and the snow kept us from going for game," said Sully.

"We did try to shoot some, but we couldn't hit anything," chimed in Len Spencer.

The three starved youths were too weak to assist in

gathering fuel for a campfire, so Jack and Harry let them sit still while the two of them bustled around with all speed.

Soon a big blaze of brush was soaring skyward, around which the half-frozen trio crouched. Three of the birds were cleaned and spitted, and it was not long before the smell of the broiling meat filled the air.

"Oh, but that smells good!" exclaimed Dixon, taking in a long whiff. "Don't keep it over the fire too long, please!"

"Here you are," returned Harry, passing the bird over whole. "Take my advice, and don't down it too fast, or your stomach won't stand it."

Sully and Spencer were also supplied with a bird each, and it was a sight worth seeing to behold them tearing and chewing the meat like a starved dog does a long-sought bone.

While the trio ate, Jack and Harry said nothing. They broiled one of the hares, and of this took a small portion, passing the remainder over to the unfortunates. But the two young hunters kept up a big thinking.

How had their enemies been humbled! Here they were craving food in the most abject fashion known. Neither Jack nor Harry could find it in his heart to upbraid them for their former misdoings.

"This makes me feel like myself once more," said Sully at length, after he had finished his bird, and was attacking a bit of the other meat. "If you fellows hadn't come along we would have been corpses by night!"

"Where were you bound?" asked Jack.

"We were trying to get to Rudd's Landing, but the heavy snowstorm overtook us, and we got lost and finally wandered here."

"Where are we now?" asked Dixon.

"You are several miles from the lake," returned Harry. "You can never go across it in this storm."

"We've got to go somewhere," put in Spencer, dismally. "Oh, I wish I was home! You'll never catch me trying to go camping in the woods in the winter again!"

"When did you leave Rudskill?" asked Harry of Sully.

The bully of the town hung his head. For once he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"We left the same day we had the trouble with you about the iceboat," he replied, in a low voice. "We made up our minds to have a rival camp."

"Did you come up by the way of Rudd's Landing?"

"No, we took the cars to Bagsville."

"And then went down into the valley and built the lean-to?"

"Yes, after we—we came to your camp," faltered Sully.

"And played ghost and took our traps, eh?" said Jack, a little bitterly.

"Yes; but Bascoe, I hope you—you'll forgive us," faltered Sully.

"It was awful mean to do, and now you are treating us so good—better than we deserve," put in Spencer, in a choking tone.

"It got us into a lot of trouble," remarked Harry. "We came near being arrested for the chickens you stole."

"We didn't steal any chickens," cried Dixon.

"You didn't! Well, those farmers thought so. That's the reason they took your traps."

"We bought those chickens from some men on the road," said Spencer. "But we only paid fifteen cents apiece for them, and after the men were gone we came to the conclusion that the fowls must have been stolen, and we were sure of it when those farmers took our things."

"Then why did you run away—why didn't you come out boldly and explain matters?"

"We knew it would do no good, for the evidence was all against us, as we had been hunting near one of the farmer's places, and he had seen us. Besides, we didn't want to meet you fellows after we had taken your traps."

A silence followed, and then Spencer came and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Say, won't you forgive us, Webb? I'm sorry, and I know Pete and Bill are, too."

"Well, let it pass," returned Harry, briefly.

"I guess you have suffered enough," added Jack. "But, mind you, no more funny work in the future."

"I'll never do any harm to you fellows again!" cried Pete Sully.

"Nor I," exclaimed Billy Dixon. "You fellows have been kind when we didn't deserve it."

The fire had burned a trifle low during the talk, but

now Jack and Harry replenished it, and soon the cave-like shelter was as warm as toast.

In the meantime the snow came down as thickly as ever outside, and the wind whistled merrily through the brush and trees around and above them. A doubtful look came into Harry's face as he listened to it.

"What time is it, Jack?" he asked.

"Nearly five o'clock."

"Can we make camp before it gets too dark?"

"It will be hard work. But once on the creek the darkness ought not to bother us. But what of these fellows?" Jack continued, in a low tone. "We can't leave them behind."

"And we can't very well take them along," said Harry.

"If it wasn't for the others wondering what had become of us, we might stay here over night and go back in the morning," Jack went on, after a thoughtful pause. "This seems a very good place to roost."

"But the others would think we had missed our way in the snow and got lost, and they would worry themselves sick. We said nothing about remaining away over night," replied Harry.

"We might leave these fellows here until to-morrow, and then come back and show them the way," Jack suggested.

"Don't leave us alone, please don't!" cried Spencer, who was the greatest coward of the party. "Take us with you!"

"You are not strong enough to walk to our camp,"

said Harry. "You would play out before you got halfway."

"Well, don't leave us, that's good fellows," said Dixon.

"One of us might stay and the other might go back," suggested Harry. "And then in the morning the party from here could start down the creek."

"That's so," put in Sully, eagerly. "One of you stay, and leave some of the grub behind."

The matter was talked over a few minutes longer, and then it was decided that this plan should be followed.

A cent was tossed up to see who should undertake the immediate return to the camp on the creek, and the lot fell to Harry. He left all the game behind but two of the wild turkeys, and five minutes later had disappeared in the swirling snow beyond the shelter of the cliff.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LAST OF THE WILDCAT.

Harry knew that he had no easy task before him, yet he started out with a brave heart, resolved to cover the distance to the camp as quickly as possible.

Knowing how great was the force of the wind, he buttoned his overcoat tightly about him and strapped his game bag and gun to his person in such a way that they could not be lost, no matter how many tumbles and plunges in the immense snowdrifts were taken.

"If I move right along I ought to strike camp by seven or half-past," he murmured to himself, as he struck out for the creek. "Ugh! but this is beastly!"

The first blast around the edge of the shelter nearly threw him flat on his back, so strong was it. The hard snow was dashed into his face as if it was sand thrown by a shovel in the hands of a laborer. He gasped in spite of himself.

"It's getting wilder instead of moderating," he thought. "This must be something like a Western blizzard. How bleak and desolate it looks on all sides!"

Fortunately, Harry found a streak of land almost clear of snow, and stretching away toward where the creek ran. Along this stretch he now pursued his course, stopping only occasionally, to catch his breath and prepare for the coming of an extra heavy blast.

The snow was blinding, and it was a wonder that he did not become turned around. But he kept on in a straight line from the cliff, and this was bound, sooner or later, to bring him to the watercourse he was seeking.

Presently the bared streak was passed, and now he was compelled to force his way along through snow that was from two inches to two feet deep. The deep places tired him not a little, and by the time the vicinity of the creek was reached he could scarcely drag one foot after the other.

"Thank fortune I am this far!" he exclaimed, half-aloud, as the trees which lined the watercourse came into sight through the driving snow. "Now, there is at least no danger of getting lost, no matter what other peril confronts me."

The thought had hardly passed through his mind when he stepped into a snowdrift and sank down to his waist. He struggled to get out, but only went the deeper.

"My gracious! this won't do," he cried, in alarm. "There must be a hollow below me that has been filled up."

He struggled on for a step or two, and then went down to his armpits, and only saved himself from going down still farther by putting out his arms and hands flatly on the snow around him.

He was now thoroughly scared, expecting every instant to be smothered to death in the snow. There was no use in trying to go ahead farther. He must get back to the high ground.

It was a hard and precarious struggle the lad had to

leave the deep snow. But at last he wormed his way around, and half-stepped, half-rolled back to where he had stood a few minutes before. The loose snow had gotten into his sleeves and his collar, and this chilled him, despite the exertions he had made.

After this experience, he was cautious in his further forward movements. He walked along the edge of the hollow for several hundred feet, and did not attempt to gain the creek until a pathway that was nearly bare presented itself. Then he passed the thin belt of timber, and finally found himself on the ice of the watercourse.

Here he stopped for a rest, crouching behind a number of trees and rocks for protection. He had covered about one-third of the distance to camp, and it had taken nearly an hour to do it. At this rate it would be long after dark ere his journey came to an end.

Harry did not dare to rest too long, fearing that the cold would make him drowsy and cause him to go to sleep, from which he would probably never awaken. He remained behind the trees and rocks just long enough to "catch his wind," and then set off as rapidly as he could down the creek.

One-half of the distance down the watercourse was completed, and the boy was just congratulating himself on the fine progress he was making when a sound reached his ear that literally made his hair stand on end.

It was the cry of a wildcat, and it came from the brush immediately on his left!

The cry lasted only a short while, but Harry had heard it before, and he at once recognized it.

He knew the creature was out seeking food. Most likely it was in a half-starved condition, and fierce beyond expression.

The boy did not know what to do. To flee was out of the question. The creature could easily reach him if it so wished. Nor would it avail to climb a tree.

He must prepare to defend himself should the wildcat attack him, and he unslung his gun with all the haste possible, and got it ready for immediate use.

The cry of the creature was repeated after a short interval of silence, but the wildcat did not as yet show itself.

With his heart thumping violently in his breast, Harry continued on his way, but with his glance over his shoulder in the direction from which the sound had proceeded.

A hundred feet farther on, the creek made a bend, and here it grew narrower. He kept in the middle of the frozen stream, but the trees on either side were not ten feet away.

Suddenly the cry broke out again, so close to him that Harry sprang back and hoisted his gun to his shoulder. Then the wildcat appeared from over the top of a flat rock and made a leap directly for the throat of the boy.

Bang! went the gun, and the shot flew for the greater part under the creature's body. Several pierced its front legs, and, with a snarl that was tigerish in its intensity, it fell directly at Harry's feet.

Hardly had it landed on the ice when, with its hind legs, it made another leap at the boy, who endeavored to ward it off by thrusting the point of the gun barrel at it.

The muzzle entered the wildcat's open mouth, and once more it was forced to drop back upon its haunches.

Harry turned to flee, and gained several yards before the beast could steady itself on its wounded legs and make after him. But soon the wildcat was close at his heels, and, with a screech, it fastened itself on his back.

Whirling about, Harry shook off the dreaded creature with such force that the wildcat went over on its back on the ice. Before it could recover, he dealt it a blow on the side with the gun that sent it spinning over the ice for a distance of several yards.

Harry wished he had time to reload the gun, but this was out of the question. The wildcat was wounded and dazed, but in less than five seconds it was up again, and, with added fierceness, it came at the boy a third time.

Harry knew it was now a fight to the finish, and his courage was aroused to its highest pitch. As the wildcat leaped for him, he sprang to one side, and once again brought his gun down, this time flat on the creature's head.

There was a sharp crack and a shrill cry, and the wildcat lay still. More than likely its skull was crushed in.

Not to take any chances, should the creature be shamming, Harry hastily reloaded, and then, stepping up to the animal, he discharged the gun directly at its head. There was no sign of life. The wildcat was dead.

"Thank fortune!" he murmured to himself. "That's what I call a good job done!"

With a bit of cord, Harry suspended the dead body to the limb of a tree, that he might come back some other

time and get the skin for its fur, and then he continued on his journey.

The excitement attending the journey was nothing compared to what he had just passed through, and he thought no more of the hardships of the walk through wind and snow. He pressed steadily on, and at a little before eight o'clock reached the outskirts of the well-known spot for which he was bound.

Coming in sight of the campfire he let out a shout to notify the others of his approach. There was no answer.

"Must be in the hut asleep," he muttered, and pressed forward until the open doorway was reached.

But the hut was empty! The camp was deserted!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SNOW SIEGE ENDED.

For the moment Harry was alarmed. What could have become of those left behind in charge of Camp Rest?

"Perhaps they grew anxious about Jack and me and have gone out to hunt us up," he reasoned. "I'll call them again."

He went out and yelled at the top of his lungs. At first there was no reply, but presently came a call from some distance down the lake.

Ten minutes later Andy and Boxy appeared side by side, with Pickles behind them, carrying a heavy string of fish.

"We've been spearing and snaring fish all afternoon," explained Andy. "See, we have caught nine, and none of them less than a pound in weight! Where is Jack?"

"I left him behind in another camp," returned Harry.

"He isn't sick or hurt, is he?" cried Andy, quickly.

"No, but he's in charge of three sick young fellows," and Harry smiled quizzically.

"Three sick young fellows," repeated Boxy. "Whom do you mean?"

"Pete Sully, Dixon and Spencer."

"No!" roared both Andy and Boxy.

"Yo' doan' say," added Pickles. "If dat ain't de wuss yit!"

They were soon about the campfire, and here, while Pickles cleaned the wild turkeys and fish, Harry told them of what had happened since Jack and he had started out on the search for game.

The others listened with deep interest. They were all affected when they learned how the bully and his companions had been found literally starving, and were glad to hear that Jack and Harry had treated them kindly.

"It ought to make Sully and the others mend their ways," said Andy.

"It will, if I am not greatly mistaken," returned Harry. "Certainly, they will never try to harm us again."

Harry was thoroughly tired out, and was the first to roll himself up and go to sleep. One after another the others followed, and by nine o'clock Camp Rest was as silent as the grave, for the wind died out utterly.

In the morning a welcome surprise awaited the boys. The snow had ceased falling, and the sun was coming up as clear as a disc of gold over the hills.

"Hurrah! the snow siege is ended!" shouted Boxy. "And right glad am I of it!"

"I guess we all are," said Andy. "I was sick of being snowed in. Now, if it remains clear, we may have a chance to go out by to-morrow."

"Yes; I hope it stays clear for the rest of the outing," put in Harry. "It is no fun to be out in a snowstorm with the wind blowing a perfect gale in your face."

After breakfast the camp was put in order in anticipation of Jack's return with the unfortunate trio. Fresh pine boughs were placed in one corner of the hut, in case

any of the unfortunates should be exhausted by the trip and wish to lie down.

Harry had told of his adventure with the wildcat, and Andy said he hoped his brother and the others would not encounter such a beast.

They waited around the campfire until noon. Then one after another began to grow uneasy.

"He ought to be here by this time," murmured Andy, for at least the tenth time.

"That's so," said Boxy. "He's had four hours of daylight and more."

"I dun racken he waited fo' de sun to git wahmer," said Pickles, and this proved to be the case.

The dinner was cooking over the stone oven when a shout was heard up the creek, and there appeared Jack, carrying on his strong young shoulders Len Spencer, while beside him walked Pete Sully with the game bag and Bill Dixon with the guns. Every one of the crowd looked thoroughly tired out.

The boys around the campfire gave a cheer, to which Jack responded rather feebly. Sully and the others were too ashamed to utter a sound.

Andy and Boxy saw at a glance how mean they felt, and did what they could to make matters easy for them. They realized that the spirits of their enemies were broken, and they had no desire to do any heartless "crowing" because of this.

Sully and Dixon were able to take care of themselves, but Spencer had collapsed when almost in sight of camp, and had now to be given every possible care. He was

laid in the hut, and Pickles made the boy who had been his own individual enemy a cup of broth which Spencer stowed away gratefully.

During the afternoon Sully was persuaded to tell his story, to which Dixon added his own experiences. We will not go into the details. Suffice it to say that the outing of the three had been a dismal failure from the start, and they were now anxious for but one thing—to get home again.

"I don't see how you can get back, excepting you cross the lake and find a road to Rudd's Landing," said Harry.

"Isn't there a railroad station down the lake on this side?" asked Dixon.

"Why, yes—Andrewsville!" cried Boxy. "It must be about three miles from here."

"Then we'll try to get to that place," said Sully. "We can take the cars from there to Bagsville, where we can try to get our traps back, and then go from Bagsville to Rudskill. I don't want any more tramping through the woods—at least not during the winter."

During the remainder of that day all hands took it easy. The sun shone brightly, and on every side the snow went down as if by magic.

Early next morning all hands were stirring around the fire. Spencer felt once more like himself, and the unfortunate trio determined to set out for Andrewsville without delay. A good breakfast was had, and then Sully, Dixon and Spencer bid the members of the Zero Club good-by.

It was a trying moment when the bully and his companions offered to shake hands all around.

"I—I hope you fellows have the best kind of a time," he said, in a low voice. "As for ourselves, we—we didn't deserve it, and that's all there is to it," and off he strode; and a moment later the trio were gone out of sight, beyond the bend that led down the lake.

A long breath of relief went around. Everybody wanted to say something about the departed ones, but, somehow, the right words wouldn't just come, and all were silent.

The sun was shining as it had the day previous, but it was colder. Jack and Andy had tried the snow about the camp, and found it everywhere covered with a heavy crust.

"Good! Now, if we can fit our boots with some sort of flat strips of wood, we can walk on most of the snow without much difficulty," said Jack.

"I've got an idea," said Harry, slowly. "I move we strike camp and spend the balance of our outing in some other locality."

"I would just as lief!" cried Boxy. "This is a tour, you know. Let us go up the lake a few miles."

The matter was talked over, and it was decided as Boxy wished. Harry left his wildcat pelt behind.

Long before noon they were on the way, leaving the hut and the stone oven standing, as well as the snowhouse.

"Now for several days of fresh adventures, and then for home!" cried Harry. "Boys, I do not think we can complain of lack of lively times since we have been away."

"No," returned Jack. "Sometimes the times have been a bit too lively. However, we are all safe and well, so we have no cause to complain."

On and on over the frozen lake they went until fully four miles had been covered. They then came to a large cove, beyond which was a most attractive opening among a cluster of giant oaks and walnuts.

"How will that do?" asked Andy, and they decided on the spot that it would answer very well.

A sheltered nook between three great trees was soon selected for a temporary camp, and Pickles at once set to work to build a fire and put the pot on to boil.

"Kase it always smells moah like home when de meat's cookin'," he said, with a full show of his ivories.

Before starting to build a hut or find a shelter under the rocks back of the cluster of trees, the members of the Zero Club decided to make a short trip around the place.

They set off through the snow, and in a few minutes were surprised to strike a regular country road, along both sides of which ran a barbed-wire fence.

"Hullo! this is too near civilization to suit me!" cried Harry. "We may be squatting on private property."

"That's so," returned Boxy. "We'll have to move on a mile or two."

They passed down the road for a few hundred yards and then came in sight of a large farmhouse, directly behind which was a stable and barn and half-a-dozen outbuildings.

"I wouldn't mind going to the house and buying some bread and crackers and a pie, if they had them," said

Andy. "Pumpkin pie would go mighty good for a change."

"So it would!" exclaimed Boxy. "Let us see what we can strike. We can pay—— Hullo! what's the meaning of that?"

Boxy came to a sudden halt, and so did the others. They had just seen a man run from the back of the barn and disappear in a patch of woods. Hardly had he gone when a thick cloud of smoke rolled out of one of the open doors of the barn.

"He has set that barn on fire!" gasped Andy. "My! just look at the smoke."

"Come on, boys! we must put that fire out!" cried Harry, springing ahead.

And away they dashed at top speed toward the burning structure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A LIVELY TIME.

It took the members of the Zero Club less than two minutes to reach the burning barn.

As they neared it they saw a man rush out of the kitchen of the farmhouse.

He was bareheaded and screaming at the top of his voice:

"Help! fire! help!"

"We'll help you!" cried Jack. "Are your pails handy? Where's the well?"

"The well is here by the back door! Samanthy, get the milk pails an' all the buckets you can find! The barn's afire!"

From out of the kitchen came a woman's scream. Ten seconds later an elderly female appeared, carrying half-a-dozen milk pails, a small wooden tub and a slop bucket.

In the meantime, Boxy was turning the well handle just as fast as he could and filling the big half-cask that stood beneath the spout. By the time it was half full the others had the pails and were dipping them in.

Harry and Jack and the farmer were the first to dash down to the barn. The fire was in a mass of hay near the feed box, and on this they dashed the water they carried.

"I'd like to know who sot this afire?" growled the farmer, wrathfully.

"We saw a man leave the barn and jump the rear fence," replied Jack.

"Wot kind of a looking man?"

"A tall fellow, with a soft, light hat and a blue overcoat."

"Jim Lemkins, sure as fate!" howled the farmer. "He'll have to be locked up again; commencin' his old tricks."

"Who is Jim Lemkins?" asked Harry, as they went for more water.

"A half-crazy chap from the village. He has caused no end of fires around here. But he won't cause any more—not if I have the say of it!"

Nothing more was said just then, all hands paying attention to the fire. The big barn doors were closed to keep out the draught, and in five minutes what had promised to be a serious conflagration was completely put out.

"Phew! but that was warm work!" exclaimed the farmer, after the last of the sparks were stamped out.

"You can be thankful that it is no worse," remarked Harry.

"So I be. You fellers worked like you understood what you was about."

"We've had one experience at putting out a fire," returned Jack, dryly. "We are out camping, and our hut caught and nearly burned us up."

"Gee shoo! Well, the damage here ain't much, thanks

to your comin' along an' giving a hand. Won't you come into the house?"

"Thank you, we were going to stop just as the fire broke out," replied Harry.

"Is that so?" returned the farmer, questioningly.

"Yes," added Boxy. "We wanted to see if we couldn't buy some fresh bread, crackers and pie from you. We've run out of everything but meat and coffee at our camp."

"Well, maybe Samanthy can fix you up. Come on in."

Seeing to it that none of the live sparks had escaped their notice, the party left the barn and entered the kitchen of the farmhouse, where all was cozy and warm. The farmer's wife had preceded them, and now thanked them as her husband had done for their help.

"They want to buy some fresh bread, cake and pie, Samanthy. They are out campin', and run out of that kind of stuff."

"They can't buy none, Job, but they can have all I can spare, an' welcome," replied the wife, warmly.

The matter was talked over for a few minutes, and then the good lady visited her pantry and brought forth two loaves of bread, a currant jelly layer cake and a large apple pie.

"Here you be, an' welcome," she said.

"Now, if you want any vegetables, say the word, and they be yours," said the farmer. "The cellar an' the barn are more'n full."

Once again the matter was talked over, and when the

boys were ready to leave, they had, in addition to the bread, cake and pastry, a large basket completely filled with potatoes, turnips, onions, beans and cabbage, enough to last them until the end of their outing.

When they were thanking the country folks for their kindness, a cutter drove up to the horse-block, and a young and buxom countrywoman rushed into the house. She proceeded to hug and kiss the old couple.

"Such news, ma!" she burst out. "Uncle Ben and three sleigh loads are coming over to-night for a dance! They are going to bring old Fiddler Dick and an Italian harp player along. Henry and I want you to come over sure!"

"Humph! I'm most too old for a shin-dig like that," said the farmer, but, nevertheless, he smiled broadly.

"So be I," added the wife, but she, too, looked pleased.

"Oh, you must come, both of you!" insisted the young country wife, impulsively. "And you——" and then she broke off short and gazed at the four boys who had stepped to one side out of the way.

"My daughter," said the old farmer, presenting her to the boys. "Sarah, these young fellows just helped me put a fire out in the barn—one that crazy Jim Lemkins had started. I don't know their names, but they are from Rudskill and are out camping."

With all the polish at his command, Harry stepped forward and introduced his chums and then himself. The young woman shook hands and then asked numerous questions about the affair.

Quite a friendly conversation ensued, and then it transpired that the farmer, whose name was Brodhead, knew Jack and Andy's father. He asked the boys how their parent was, and while he was doing this the daughter of the house began a whispered conversation with her mother.

"So many girls, you know, ma," Harry heard her say. "And they look like real nice chaps, too."

"Well, do as you see fit, Sarah," replied the mother. "They certainly deserve any good time we can give 'em."

Then the young woman blushed and stammered, but finally invited the boys to attend the sleigh-ride party at her home, a mile up the lake shore.

"There will be lots of girls to dance with," she added, with a little laugh. "And we shall have a great number of games, too."

"You are very kind," began Harry, and then he looked at his companions. One glance was sufficient. Every one wanted to go; and so it was settled that they would attend a regular country dance that night at eight o'clock.

Ten minutes later they were on their way back to the lake shore, where they found Pickles wondering what had become of them. A dinner of meat was ready, but they kept it waiting long enough to add some roast potatoes, and when they ate the meal they topped off with the pie, which, as Boxy put it, "struck home every time."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AT THE COUNTRY DANCE.

For the balance of the day nothing was talked of but the party they were going to attend. Pickles had not been forgotten, and he was to join in a hoe-down in the barn, where the farm hands were going to have their jollification.

Boxy and Andy spent a good bit of the time over their toilet, and it must be confessed that Jack and Harry did the same.

"We are not fit for a city party, but I guess we look well enough for this country affair," remarked Jack. "Our clothing is clean, and when we wash and comb up we'll pass in a crowd."

It was decided not to move camp until the following day, and a rude shelter was constructed under the trees, where the traps were hidden. It was not likely that they would return to the spot until nearly sunrise.

The party was expected to arrive at the farmhouse up the lake at about eight o'clock, and at half-past seven the boys set out for the place, without taking the trouble to replenish the campfire.

They had been given minute directions concerning the road, and had no difficulty in reaching their destination.

As they came in sight of the farmhouse, which was lit up from cellar to garret, they saw that the sleigh loads of relatives and neighbors had just arrived. They hurried in, and a few minutes later were introduced all around.

"Make yourselves at home," said Henry Akers, Sarah's husband. "I've heard o' the service you did my father-in-law, and I am as thankful as he is that his barn wasn't burnt down."

The fiddler and the harpist were stationed in a corner of the broad hallway, and the sitting-room and the kitchen had been cleared for dancing. Soon the lively strains of a Virginia reel broke the ice all around and set everybody to talking and laughing.

"Choose partners fer the reel!" shouted the master of ceremonies, a village dandy, who had a chrysanthemum as large as a saucer stuck in his buttonhole.

"Good gracious, I can't dance!" whispered Andy, and off he ran to a corner and was soon talking and laughing with a crowd of boys and girls. Boxy joined him, and they managed to have a real good time until supper.

Harry and Jack found two pretty country girls of about their own age willing to dance, and joined the two lines that were forming at the head of the sitting-room. Soon nearly everybody in the house was in line, old Job Brodhead and his wife leading off.

Once again the fiddler and the harp player tuned up and started the reel, and away the dancers went, one couple after the other, forward and back, forward and around, forward and join hands, and all the rest of it.

Some mistakes were made, and it grew mighty warm toward the end. But nobody minded this, and all laughed and cracked jokes, and when, nearly an hour later, the reel was ended, every one was on the best possible terms with every one else.

"I'll slip down to the barn and see how Pickles is making out," whispered Harry, and off he went, leaving Jack to entertain the girls they had danced with.

Harry found the colored youth in his glory. Pickles had brought his banjo along, and was entertaining the other colored people and the farm hands with plantation songs and tunes. It was not long before word was sent from the farmhouse to come up and entertain the others. And Pickles had to go.

In the meantime cider was flowing, and apples and nuts were passed around on all sides. About eleven o'clock the kitchen was cleared, and the older women went to work to set the tables for supper.

After the reel came other dances in the sitting-room and hall—waltzes, quadrilles and the like, and Harry and Jack and two of the young ladies who had been to dancing school danced the latest two-step, while the older folks looked on.

At last supper was announced, and such a feast as that was! There was enough three times over, and everything of the best. All of the boys were urged to eat, until Boxy whispered to Andy that every button was ready to burst off. It was a country supper never to be forgotten! They finished off with mince pie, and

nuts, and raisins, and it was after one o'clock when the feast was declared at an end.

Then came several toasts. First old Job Brodhead made a little speech, and then his son-in-law, and after this half-a-dozen neighbors.

"Maybe our young friends from Rudskill kin speak pieces," said Mother Brodhead, and then half a dozen clustered around Harry and Jack and the others, demanding something from them.

Luckily, Andy and Boxy knew a funny dialogue which they got off amid much laughter. Then Jack recited "The Sword of Bunker Hill."

"Now it's your turn, Harry," they said, after he had finished.

Harry had been thinking of what to recite, and a few scraps of an original song floated into his mind. He gave it in his own sweet tenor voice, and it fairly took the country folk by storm. He was *encored* so much that he had to follow with several others.

"You're the hero of the evening," whispered Jack, and Harry flushed furiously when the pretty girl beside him said the same thing.

Then Pickles was called in, and soon the colored boy had every one joining in the chorus of "Sweet Times Comin' By and By," and "Who's Dat A-nockin' at De Doah?" Then Pickles gave a breakdown, and got several of the old countrymen so warmed up that they took off their coats and joined in.

Following the singing came half-a-dozen games, hunt the slipper, pillows and keys, fortune-telling, forfeits

and the like. Perhaps some kissing was done, too, but in telling the story to me the boys whose fortunes I am relating did not mention this, for reasons purely their own.

"It's the best party I ever attended in my life!" cried Boxy to Harry, as they passed each other in the hall. "Beats a stiff town party all to bits!" And Harry agreed with him.

It was after five o'clock when some one suggested that they break up. Then clock and watches were consulted, and a raid was made on the closets where hats, bonnets, overcoats and tippets were stored. Fifteen minutes later the sleighs were brought around, good-bys were said, and off went the merry revelers, leaving the five boys to return to their camp in the early dawn, completely tired out, but happier than they had been for many a day.

"I never expect to attend another party like it," said Jack. "It is one of the brightest spots in the tour of the Zero Club, to my way of thinking."

"You are right, Jack. They treated us as if we were their warmest friends. It's a pity city folks cannot do as well by their country cousins when they come to town."

After all that dancing and romping around, it was a weary walk back to the temporary camp, but finally it was finished, and, lighting a big fire of brushwood, they sat around it to rest. Andy and Boxy fell asleep, and the others dozed until nearly noon.

"Now we will continue on our way up the lake front

until we get away from the neighborhood of these farmhouses," said Harry. "I don't believe any one wants dinner."

"Not just yet for me!' groaned Boxy. "Last night filled me up as full as a tick."

"Ditto," put in Andy. "Let us walk ourselves hungry first."

And so they set off on their skates up the lake, keeping as closely to the shore as the snowdrifts would permit.

By sundown they calculated that they had covered six miles. They were now in a very wild neighborhood, full of rocks and cliffs and a heavy growth of timber.

"This ought to be just the thing," said Harry, as they turned in to shore and came to a halt. "There ought to be plenty of game back of that rocky ground."

"That is true," said Jack. "What do you think, fellows, shall we look for a camping spot here?"

They agreed that no better place could be found. Ten minutes later they were behind the shelter of a clump of bushes, and then Jack and Boxy went off to find a suitable location for a permanent camp for the balance of the outing.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BLACK BEAR.

What Boxy and Jack thought would be a splendid shelter was found under a large, shelving series of rocks, nearly a hundred feet from the lake front. Here was an opening six feet wide by fifteen feet deep. The flooring was of smooth stone, covered with a great mass of leaves, which had been blown in by the wind. Of course, the snow had likewise entered, but this was soon cleaned out.

"Now, all we will have to do is to re-cover the greater part of the front with brush, and it will make the warmest kind of a shelter," said Jack.

"And the best part of it all is that there is a crevice in the rear with a good upward draught," said Boxy. "So we can build a fire inside our house, so to speak, which will be more pleasant than having it outside."

"No snakes, are there?" asked Andy, cautiously.

"Not a one. We were careful to make a thorough search around."

"Then that's the spot," put in Harry, "and the sooner we get settled the better. It promises to be very cold to-night, and we want to be where we can keep warm."

The sled was dragged to the spot selected, and the ax gotten out. While two of the boys cleaned out the

cave-like place, the others cut down poles and brush with which to shelter the front, and also collected wood for a fire.

The draught inside toward the rear was perfect, and when a fire was started on a number of stones, it blazed up merrily without letting out any of the smoke into the cave proper.

"This is fine!" cried Andy, as he sat down to rest in front of the blaze. "We ought to have had a place like this from the start."

"Unfortunately, we didn't know there was this cave to occupy," laughed Harry. "But I must confess I liked the hut."

"So did I," said Jack. "It is only the change that pleases Andy. Nowadays in life, change is everything. We are constantly craving something new and different."

Before nightfall the poles were up in front of the opening and thickly entwined with brush. Only a small doorway was left, and this was closed at night by setting the sled over it. Soon the fire in the rear made the cave-like shelter as warm as toast, so that the boys took off their overcoats and gloves—something they had seldom done in the hut.

Harry was right about it getting colder. After sunset the thermometer fell steadily. Pickles went down to the lake for a pail of water, and came back with his hands and ears half-frozen.

"De coldest night yit, suah!" he exclaimed, as he knocked his feet against the rocks and slapped his hands

over his chest to warm them. "We want lots ob fire-wood to-night, or we'll all be froze stiff as pokers by moahnin'!"

They were now hungry enough, and Jack set to work, while Pickles got extra wood, to cook a real stew of meat, potatoes and onions. The frost in the air made the concoction smell good, and when the stew was dealt out all ate their full portion.

Being sleepy, they retired early, and every one slept like a "log" until long after sunrise.

"By gracious, but it's cold!" howled Boxy, the first to rise. "And the fire almost out! Pile on some wood, Pickles!"

"I should say it was cold!" put in Andy, as he got up and stretched himself.

"The coldest yet, without a doubt," said Harry. "But stir up, all of you! We mustn't expect summer weather at this time in the year."

Piping hot coffee soon warmed them up somewhat, and inside of half an hour they were arranging to go out on a hunt. It was resolved that they should leave the fire in first-class shape and all go together, that being so much nicer than dividing up.

This plan was carried out, and before evening they had shot six rabbits, three partridges or grouse, and over a score of woodcock and other birds.

"That's sport and no error!" cried Boxy. "Now, if we can only get at some more deer to-morrow——"

"Oh, you want the earth!" cried Andy. "Deer are not so plentiful as all that."

Nevertheless Boxy's head was set on bringing down a deer, and the next day he went off with none but Pickles. The two were gone until dark, and, true enough, they came back with a small deer, which Pickles had wounded in the foreleg and Boxy had shot through the neck. On that same day the others shot half-a-dozen rabbits and partridge, and also brought down two silver-white foxes, which they resolved to take home to have stuffed.

That night they had an unexpected experience which at first gave them a great scare. They were all seated near the fire relating their various experiences, when, without a warning, there came a crash from overhead that caused all of them to spring to their feet in alarm.

"What's that?" cried Boxy.

"Evidently something is giving way!" exclaimed Jack.

"Suah de roof's comin' down!" howled Pickles.

"That sounds like it, certainly," said Harry, who was the calmest of the crowd.

"Rush for outside!" yelled Andy, as he made for the doorway.

"Andy, come back!" called Jack, catching hold of him.

"That's all right, but I don't want to get crushed," retorted his younger brother.

"Each of us had better stay here," put in Harry. "The trouble is all outside of the cave."

"Might be better in the open air than here——" began Boxy.

"Especially when the roof seems to be giving way," added Andy.

"Yes, but you can't pass the doorway without peril," returned Jack.

"Either it is a snowslide or a landslide," cried Harry. "Wait and listen!"

"Rocks comin' down sumwhar!" grumbled Pickles. "Oh, my!"

Ro-o-u-m! crash! Down in front of the cave-like shelter came a perfect avalanche of snow and loose stones, completely filling the doorway and bending in the brush wall until the poles that held it in place gave way at the top.

"Back, all of you!" shouted Harry, and they retreated just in time to prevent themselves from being completely buried.

After the first slide came several others, and for the time being the boys were afraid they would be buried alive under the cliff. They waited with wildly beating hearts for fully quarter of an hour after the last fall, and then began an examination of the situation.

The entire front of the shelter was blocked with snow and loose stones, which lay over it to the depth of eight or ten feet.

"Now the question is, how are we to get out?" said Jack, in dismay. "We are caught like rats in a trap."

"We must dig our way out, and that quickly," responded Harry. "We must have fresh air to breathe."

"Set to work with anything you can find!" cried Andy. "A bit of board, or a tin plate, or anything!"

All hands went at the wall of snow and loose stones with a will. The stuff was thrown to one side of the cave, and while Harry and Jack threw it back the others packed it away.

At the end of half an hour a passageway all of eight feet had been made, when suddenly Jack gave a shout:

"Hurrah! I have struck an open place at last!"

"Good!" returned Harry. "Now let us all get out and see how much damage has really been done."

The small opening Jack had found was enlarged with all possible haste, and then one after another the boys crawled out into the open air.

It was found that the entire top portion of the cliff, loaded down with ice and snow, had given way, and was lying all along the bottom, a distance of fully fifty feet.

"Well, there is one satisfaction," remarked Boxy, as he gazed at the wreck. "If we clear this away we need not be in fear of another such slide, for the top of the cliff is now as bare as a bald man's head."

"That's so," replied Harry. "Come, fellows, we must make that entrance larger and get the snow out of the cave before we can hope to retire for the night."

With improvised shovels and brooms they set to work to clear the snow and stones from in front of the shelter. It was hard work, but after such a scare they did not mind it. They were thankful that matters were not worse. Supposing the top of the cave had come down, what then? Most likely every one of them would have been killed.

At last Jack declared they had done enough for that night.

"We can finish up in the morning," he said. "Let us start up the fire afresh and go to bed."

"I'm willing," returned Andy. "My back is nearly broken from handling this home-made shovel."

The boys started to go back into the cave, when, suddenly, Pickles, who was looking up at the top of the cliff, let out an unearthly yell and clutched Harry's arm convulsively.

"Fo' de sake ob goodness!"

"What's it, Pickles?" questioned Harry, quickly. "What has frightened you?"

There was no need for the colored youth to answer. A loud growl rang in the ears of all the boys, and the next instant down from the top of the cliff leaped a big, brown bear into their very midst.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

END OF THE TOUR.

It was quite likely that the big brown bear which had thrust itself among the members of the Zero Club so unceremoniously had had its winter habitation somewhere along the top of the cliff, and that the snow, ice and landslide had brought it forth to see the cause of the disturbance.

Evidently, it imagined that the boys had brought about the ruin, for it was thoroughly enraged, and, as soon as it landed, stood up on its hind legs to embrace Harry, who happened to be a trifle closer than the others.

Harry lost no time in leaping out of reach, and then the great bear turned upon Jack, almost knocking him down with a savage blow from one paw.

"Run! run!" screamed Andy. "Run, Jack, or he will kill you!"

With an effort, Jack regained his balance, and then he took Andy's advice, as did indeed all of the others. They ran in every direction, and in less than half a minute the bear had the field entirely to himself.

At first bruin appeared on the point of following them into the woods, but he stopped short and sniffed the air. The smell of the cooked meat in the cave reached him, and, turning, he disappeared inside of the shelter.

"He has gone into the cave!" exclaimed Boxy to Harry, breathlessly. "Good-by to all our meat!"

"If he only takes the meat and gets out I won't care," put in Andy. "My, but he nearly scared me out of my wits!"

"I doan' want nuffin' to do wid dat chap," remarked Pickles, with a grave shake of his woolly head. "He is wuss nor all de wolves an' wildcats put togedder, 'deed he is!"

"Come on to where we can look into the cave," said Harry, and they moved to another spot, where Jack presently joined them.

"By the boots! but I had a narrow escape!" said Jack, with a shiver. "That crack from the bear's paw nearly knocked me silly!"

"What shall we do?" questioned Boxy, after a moment of silence.

"I'd like to shoot him," replied Harry. "What a prize he would make!"

"Oh, my! I wouldn't go near him for the world!" exclaimed Boxy.

"Nor I!" added Andy. "Don't try it, Harry! It will cost you your life!"

"How are you going to kill him?" asked Jack. "Not a single one of us has a gun."

"Didn't you have your gun out?" asked Harry, turning to Boxy.

"I had the rifle out, but I—I dropped it when the bear leaped down," stammered Boxy, in considerable confusion.

"Where did you drop it?"

"About three or four yards from the doorway to the cave."

"Humph! A fellow might crawl up and grab it," mused Harry.

"No! no! doan' yo' go fo' to do nuffn' so foolish!" cried Pickles. "Dat b'ar will come out an' dat will be de end ob you!"

"That's so," said Andy. "Let the bear satisfy himself and go off when he pleases."

"Ah, I have it!" cried Harry, an idea striking him. "Just stay where you are, fellows; I think I can do up his bearship in a way he won't be looking for."

"What are you going to do?" questioned Boxy.

"Wait and see."

On the instant Harry was off. Instead of walking toward the cave, he made a detour, coming up at one end of the high cliff.

He found a place where he could ascend the icy slope without much difficulty, and this done, he crept along silently until he occupied a spot directly over the entrance to the shelter below.

He looked about him, and soon found what he wanted, a round stone, weighing all of forty or fifty pounds.

He half-rolled, half-carried the stone to the very edge of the cliff, and here set it so that a slight push would send it downward. Then he procured several more stones of smaller size.

This done, he took up a handful of pebbles and rolled them over the cliff, at the same time shouting out loudly.

The echo had hardly died away when the bear made its appearance at the mouth of the cave. He came out almost all of the way and looked around fiercely.

Clatter! crash! down came the big stone, pushed off at just the right moment. It took the bear in the neck, and caused him to fall down with a loud roar of pain.

In great excitement, Harry caught up two of the smaller stones. The first, when hurled downward, missed its mark; but the second caught the beast in the top of the head, directly over his right eye, inflicting an ugly wound.

"Hurrah! you have knocked him!" cried Jack, from the woods. "Give him another!"

"Get the rifle if you can!" sang out the boy on the cliff.

"I will, if the bear will give me half a chance!" returned Jack.

The bear now understood whence came the attack, and staggering to his feet, he looked around to find some way up the cliff. Harry continued to pour down the rocks, and one particularly sharp-pointed one landed on bruin's nose.

Up went another roar of pain, and the bear danced around, shaking his head from side to side in rage.

"That was a corker!" yelled Boxy, somewhat recovering his courage. "Give him another, and—my gracious! He's coming this way!"

It was true. The bear had turned swiftly, and was now making for the woods where Boxy, Andy and Pickles were standing. Jack in the meantime had crawled to

one side, waiting for a chance to dash in and secure the rifle.

The three boys scrambled to get out of the way, and a second later Jack managed to gain possession of the much-coveted firearm.

The bear went a dozen paces or more and then stopped and turned to the boy with the rifle. He rushed up and stood on his hind legs, and at that moment Jack pulled the trigger.

The bullet passed through bruin's shoulder, inflicting a dangerous but not fatal wound. The beast was now all but beaten, and yet there was lots of fight in him. Could he have reached one of the boys he would have killed him on the spot.

Seeing the bear so far away from the cliff, Harry slid down to the bottom, and as Jack ran off with bruin at his heels, he slipped into the cave, and brought out all of the shotguns, each of which was luckily loaded with coarse buckshot.

As Jack ran in one direction, Harry took another, and soon joined Andy, Boxy and Pickles.

"Come with me," he said, as he dealt out the guns. "We can get the best of that bear now if we only half try. He's limping dreadfully."

Off he dashed, and the others at his heels. They caught up to the bear at the instant that Jack yelled to them to come to his assistance.

Bang! bang! went the shotguns in rapid succession. The four doses were too much for bruin. He uttered

one growl, sharp and shrill, and then tumbled over—dead.

At first the boys could not realize that their dreadful enemy was dead. They ran back to the cave to reload the rifle and the guns. But it was not needed, and after a wait of fully five minutes they went back to inspect their great prize.

"Talk about wolves and wildcats and deer!" cried Harry, not without pardonable pride. "This caps the climax. Boys, I am done hunting now."

"And so am I," returned Jack. "No more of life in the woods for this season."

"Yes, I jess as lief pull up an' go back to Rudskill to-morrow," broke in Pickles. "I couldn't sleep out heah no moah if you paid me ten dollars an hour."

"We must have that bear stuffed," said Jack. "And when we get a regular clubroom we'll have him stand on one end of the platform as a memento of this glorious outing."

There was no sleep for any of the boys that night, and early in the morning they set to work to skin the bear as nicely as possible, so that it might be turned over to the taxidermist in Rudskill when they arrived home.

Skinning the bear and getting ready to "pull up stakes" took the whole of the day, and despite their fears of more bears, they slept that night. By daybreak they were on their way across Rock Island Lake.

Twenty-four hours later they reached Budd's Landing, where Barton Coils greeted them warmly. The old man was astonished at their success in the hunting line.

A crowd of friends and curious strangers greeted them when the *Icicle* ran up to the town front of Rudskill and the boys left the iceboat; the bear skin and head were much admired, as were also the other trophies.

"Had a good deal better luck than Sully and his crowd," said one of the town boys, and the members of the Zero Club and Pickles rather guessed that they had.

The boys were received at their various homes with open arms. It was found that Minnie Woodruff had quite recovered from the effects of her involuntary bath in the river, from which Harry had so bravely rescued her.

The things the boys had brought back from the deserted cottage in the woods were sold before the winter was over. For his old coins Harry received nearly four hundred dollars, while his companions obtained for the other things from sixty to a hundred dollars each.

This grand outing of the Zero Club took place several winters ago. Pickles has now a steady place in Mr. Woodruff's employ, and the four boys are now in high school and college, and there we will leave them, trusting to meet them again in the near future, and in the meantime wishing them as much success as they had when braving perils by ice and snow.

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